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STOIC

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by

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To my family:

You are all my heroes.
Together we survived.

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Prologue

The day after my mother's funeral in 1972, I stood with my father in the living room while the Knights of Columbus removed all of the medical equipment that sustained my mother's existence as a paraplegic. I was fourteen, my father was 45. As the hospital bed, commode, and wheelchair exited out the front door, the two of us watched in a silent farewell. When he closed the door, my father turned to me and said, "It's over now Shari." And for my father the six years my mother lived after the car accident that shattered all of our lives were over. Buried, forgotten, a past to never revisit by the living. Six months after my mother's death, my father remarried to provide his children with a mother. My childhood home was sold and the VanDusartz family moved forward with a new home, a new family, boats, cars, and other material signs of prosperity. My stepmother tried to take a maternal role in my life. But she was not my mother, and we tolerated each other for only four years before I became pregnant, married, and left my father to build my own life.

I will be 45 this year in January, the same age of my mother when she died. This February my youngest child turns fourteen, the age I was when I lost my mother.

When I first wrote those lines, I was struggling emotionally. Intellectually, I knew I would most likely not die young. Yet, I had lived my entire life based on my mother's live span. At 45, I had raised three children to adulthood. My marriage was failing, and I

searched for answers. Where did I go from here?

The story of who I am and what I am needed to excavated. Most of my life, I acknowledged the car accident that had changed my life course in childhood. I needed to understand how the trauma had impacted my adult life. Over the course of my education I had completed the superficial work. My mother had four children, I had four children. She liked the domestic arts, I liked the domestic arts. That was about the extent of what I knew.

The loss I felt needed to be explored. What, if anything did I remember? Why do I accept and confront adversity so willingly? This was one anniversary for me to find the answers to help me with the third era of my life. A competent woman who understands her being.

Part I

Shattered

In August of 1967, three months after the car accident, we children are finally allowed to visit mother in the hospital. My fourteen year-old brother, Dave, who was not in the car with the rest of the family, has not seen Mom since the morning of the accident. My older sister, Cindy, twelve; my younger sister, Kay, seven, and I, eight, have not seen Mom since the frantic minutes in front of the hospital's emergency entrance with doctors and nurses sprinting my mother down a hallway on a gurney, leaving the three us huddled in the mist outside.

Life has taken on a new routine: my father works, stops at home to eat dinner with the family, returns phone calls, and then goes to the hospital every night. I hide in the basement stairwell while my father talks on the phone in the kitchen. He cannot see me if I open the door halfway and wedge myself on the top step behind the hollow wood and wall. He stands only six feet away from me in the kitchen and speaks with a resigned voice using the black wall-mounted phone across from the stove.

"The sixth vertebrae. The spinal cord was severed; no surgery will ever repair the nerves from her waist down. .... Actually, the tingling in her arms is a good sign. The doctors are optimistic that she'll regain complete sensation in her arms. ... No. The last surgery confirmed the damage. She'll never walk again. .... No, the kids don't know. I really don't know how to tell them. ... They'll figure it out after tomorrow night. I'm

sure. I'll cross that bridge when I come to it I guess. … Tomorrow evening. She just asks for more pain medication and sleeps. The doctors think seeing the kids may help to give her a reason to work at the therapy. … Okay, I can't think of anything you can do, but I'll let you know if something comes up."

My father replaces the heavy handset onto the phone's base and I hold my breath, tears running down my face. I stuff my clenched fist into my mouth to stifle any uncontrollable sobs that might betray my hiding place while I stand at attention waiting for the stomping sound of my father's work boots to signal his retreat from the kitchen. I can hear his heavy footfalls move to the living room, and I tiptoe down the wooden stairs to the unfinished basement. In the middle of the basement, dirty clothes form peaks under the clothes chute from the main level of the house. I bury myself in the soiled laundry and let the tears flow, my grief absorbed by a grimy bath towel.

Dad tells us that visiting Mom in the hospital marks a new beginning. All of the girls prepare. The night before the reunion, Cindy helps Kay and me set our fine blond hair in the pink foam curlers with the plastic clips. I am tired. I never sleep well on curlers. Some fall out as I toss and turn in the night, my subconscious replaying my eavesdropping, my imagination filling in for the reality of what the conversation might mean. In the morning I have long curler-sized marks on my forehead, my cheeks, and my neck where the released curlers conformed to my skin in the night. My hair does not turn out. Half is curled so tightly to my head it looks like I belong to one of the Irish families in my church. The other half is so straight it looks like I ironed it. Cindy tries to combine the two extremes with a fierce brushing. A stroke of the hairbrush across my scalp by

Cindy results in a yelp from me. Finally Cindy gives up and finds matching barrettes and clips the mess away from my face on each side and puts water on my bangs, creating an uneven line an inch above my eyebrows. As long as you don't look at the back of my hair, I look presentable.

I'm sure the orderlies watch the procession entering the hospital as the early arrivals at church do, with forward stares that take in the newcomers without intrusion. It is a reverent family that passes through the door, our demeanor mimicking the reverence of a Holy Day of Obligation. In the same order we enter church for Mass we pass into our new existence: Dad leading, Dave, my older sister, Cindy, and Kay and I taking up the rear. I am just 16 months older than Kay, and at eight and seven we still hold hands when we are scared. Today our white knuckles intertwine as we move through the revolving doors and enter a sterile world. The walls shine, the floors shine, and the faces of the nurses glow under the fluorescent lights that try to hide the fact that in this world no natural light enters.

I crinkle my nose and nudge Kay with my elbow. "What's that smell?" Johnson's paste wax, beef stew, urine, bleach, and something else combine and scramble my brain. I want to retreat from the attack on my nose.

"Shh. Shari, Dad's going to get mad." Kay releases my hand and latches onto Cindy's arm. Cindy responds and she takes Kay up with her. I walk without my partner, breathing through my mouth so the smell isn't so noticeable.

I don't dare complain to my father. Last night he sat us down to explain this visit is a privilege; children are not usually admitted to the seventh floor of the hospital where

the seriously ill reside. We will not enter mother's hospital room. Instead, she will visit with us in the hallway in her bed. She is not yet well enough to move to a chair.

In the elevator, Dad lets me push the button. I have to stand on my tiptoes to reach the correct one. The doors slide shut and we glide upwards towards the unknown. With a jerk the elevator car stops and the silver doors slide open to reveal an empty hallway. I look to the left and see a nurse's station. Dad nods to the right and as a unit, we move towards the waiting area.

Before entering the small alcove tucked into the corner of the hospital floor away from the electronic hub of Intensive Care, I sneak a better look to see if I can spot Mom. My only view is the nurse's station with phones, lights, and monitors demanding constant attention for each of the single rooms with one bed that form a glass circle around the professional center. A siren shrieks and a red light blinks frantically above one of the doors that surround the circular station. Nurses and doctors run towards the door, grabbing stuff as they pass through a section of the counter that magically lifts to allow escape from the round space. Dad notices my distraction and pushes me away from the unfolding excitement into the deserted waiting area.

"You guys wait here while I check on your mother. Remember, she's still recovering. She's in a special bed to help her get better faster. Don't let her see you upset, Shari, if you think you are going to cry, just say you have to go to the bathroom. Smile and tell her about school, who your teachers are and what you'll be studying. Everyone okay? I'll be right back."

Dad departs, going to see if Mom is ready for the family reunion. He puts Dave in

charge leaving all four of us kids alone in the room. We pair off, I sit next to Dave on a green vinyl love seat and Cindy allows Kay to sit on her lap like a baby across the room on the orange vinyl chair. I eye Kay on Cindy's twelve-year-old lap and sigh with envy. I am too old to sit on someone's lap and be comforted, I must find my own inner resources, I have been given the title of "a big girl." My back against the couch, feet dangling two feet from the floor, I try to control the cauldron boiling in my belly by simultaneously twiddling my thumbs and swaying my legs: left, right, left, right, over, under, over, under. I forget where I am until Dave grabs my right thigh.

"Stop it. You're shaking the couch."

My legs hang uselessly above the floor. Without any movement the blood pools in my toes and I can feel my toes starting to drift off. I lean over and rub the top of the brushed suede, my sweaty hands leaving streaks across the light brown material. My body jackknifed on the couch, I try to find a solution. I know better than to lift my leg and put my shoes on the couch. I try to retain a ladylike position with my tail bone flush against the seat, arms reaching to the bottom of my shoes. My brother rolls his eyes toward the white acoustic ceiling.

Dave leans over and whispers in my ear: "Hey Shari, I bet you can't count all of the holes in that tile. Just the one above your head."

I return to an upright position and start to count the small black dots that occupy the heavenly space above me. A challenge is never unanswered in the VanDusartz family.

"75, 76, 77"

A shrill ring interrupts my focus on little black holes.

Dave answers the beige phone sitting on a small table in the corner of the room. He pauses and then tentatively speaks: "Hello? Oh, Dad. Okay, we'll meet you in the hallway." Replacing the receiver, Dave issues the order.

"Okay, they're bringing Mom out now. We're supposed to meet Dad in the hall. Come on!" Dave leads the way to our reunion with our mother.

The first I see of my mother after the accident is in a parade emerging from one of the rooms surrounding the nurses' station. A doctor, like the drum major of a marching band, leads with a clipboard, back straight, eyes on the mark: his patient's children. Dad is holding onto one side of the metal bed frame, his lips moving in a whispered conversation directed to the top of the contraption. Everyone else on the floor has vanished, leaving only my family in the corridor next to the elevators. I hear the landing bells signal visitors on other floors; no one gets off on the seventh floor.

My mother is immobilized in a bed that rotates 360 degrees. The mattress is suspended midair in the middle of a huge metal circle. Four poles attach the bed frame to a large O. I can see cranks and knobs that secure the floating bed. Mom's head is kept in place with a metal halo that is attached by long silver poles to one end of the long hospital bed. Strong beige straps crisscross her blanketed body, outlining the skeletal frame that takes up little space in the standard bed. She is tiny – height: four feet 11 and ¾ inches. Her pre-accident weight: 98 pounds. There is very little left of her body mass now. Every inch of my mother seems bolted or strapped into place.

I forget to breathe through my mouth and suddenly I am besieged by the smells of the hospital. Up on the seventh floor a new combination of smells attacks my nose. The

wax, stew, urine and bleach are joined by the smell of uncontrolled bowels. My stomach heaves and I cry. Dave pulls me back into the waiting room.

"Shari, you have to stop crying. Remember, you can't upset Mom!" Dave wipes my nose with hospital Kleenex. It feels like sandpaper against my skin. Dave does not have a gentle touch. He roughly wipes the tears from my eyes and gives me a new tissue.

"Now blow." Dave issues the order and I obey.

I struggle to catch my breath and it is over. The tears stop. My body quakes as I take back control, yet my personal emotional barometer blares on my forehead. It is my curse. If I am upset the birthmark that covers my forehead becomes a pulsing, neon indicator that I am not okay.

"Hurry up! She's almost here." Dave takes a comb out of his back pocket and awkwardly arranges my bangs over my forehead, leaving rows of white from the comb's teeth on top of the neon red skin. I move my hand to cool the burning and Dave knocks my hand down.

"Now give me your hand and let's go see Mom. You can't cry Shari, it's not good for Mom to see you upset." His hand sweats in mine as we join Cindy and Kay in the hall watching my mother's float make its way down the corridor toward the reception committee.

As the bed moves towards us, I squint to take in every detail before Mom is close enough to know I am staring – her hair - dark brown hair? I touch my own locks, that is what I had in common with my mother – we were both fair skinned with light hair – mine the tow-head blond of my mother's childhood, hers the light brown of adulthood. The hair

displaced by the metal halo is the color of the decaying walnut trees in the state park where we go camping on hot summer nights. Shocked, I continue to take a silent inventory of other changes.

Where are her glasses? How can she see us without her glasses? My mother is unique in the vision department; she has one nearsighted eye and one farsighted eye. Before the accident, sometimes Kay and I would steal her glasses and put them on to create a dizzy feeling, like we had spun in circles until we dropped. This person didn't need the corrective lenses any longer; Dad says the accident knocked her vision straight. I wonder where her glasses are now.

Everything but her face is hidden from view. And why is her skin on her face so weird? Rough pimple-like eruptions cover her features. Dad said that the road scraped Mom's skin open and debris embedded itself in the open wounds. Her face looks like the chenille bedspread on my bed, smooth underneath with huge knots on top. Some of the knots have exploded, and I see dark grains escaping from the flesh. The black pockmarks are ugly. My Mom is pretty.

Where is my Mom?

The bed comes to a halt a foot in front of where we wait. Since my mother cannot move her head, Dad directs us to stand "right here next to me" so that Mom has a clear view of our faces. One by one we present ourselves: Dave, Cindy, Kay and finally when Daddy thinks I can handle it, me. Her blue eyes blaze into my soul, looking for something. I manage to gaze back and not cry as she gives me my allotted time. She asks how I am, and I reply as prompted: "fine." But I am not fine and I feel the cauldron in

my stomach turn like the bed my mother is attached to. I swallow the bile and pray I will not throw-up. Seconds tic by as I rush to fill in mother on the new school year starting next month. Suddenly a nurse gives my father a signal and our time is up. One by one my father lifts us up to kiss my mother goodbye for the evening. I can't help but feel the dampness on her cheeks.

"I miss you Mommy. Can you come home soon?" I need my mother to stroke my hair, to hug my body, to do something other than kiss my cheek. But that is all she is able to do, and when my father puts me down, I hug my arms around my chest to stem the tears materializing with my mother's kiss.

The doctor notes the time on his watch and writes something in his notebook.

"Can you return tomorrow evening?" he asks my father.

"Yes." My dad's one word answer adds a new routine to our daily existence. The family will visit with mother nightly on the seventh floor of Ramsey County Hospital. With a signal to the nurses, the parade of medical personnel does an about face and my mother is wheeled backwards to the ward mouthing words that do not reach my ears. The nurses' shoes squeak in unison, the lights shine, and the only image remaining is the polished silver of the bed that supports what is left of my mother.

My dad holds onto the top of my shoulder as we all stand at attention waving goodbye until the bed takes a turn into a room. My tears no longer obey my stay command and flow freely. I start to cry so hard that I get the hiccups, and all the nurses look down the hall. My dad finally picks me up and pats my back.

Legacy

The VanDusartz family history is a matter of pride for the American descendants. The German name is du Sart de Vigneulle or Dusartz de Vigneuil. The family origin dates back to 1658, and the du Sart de Vigneulle family was originally certified with a French noble title. Alexander du Sart de Vigneulles was the first of the family to receive a fudal fief in Luxemberg due to his marriage to Anna Maria Von Veyder.

As the ancestral home is traced back by to the Lorraine region, one determines the claim to either French or Prussian heritage based upon which country was victorious in the last war. In 1827, my great-grandfather's eldest brother received certification of Prussian Nobility as the Prussian government then ruled the area and accepted the French noble title. The name is registered under number 66 in the Articles of the Nobility of the Rhein Province.

The family coat of arms is a blue shield with five golden rings in it, arranged in two-two and one. The helmet is blue-golden silver rim and a golden crowned lion on top. The blankets: blue-golden. The ancestry is documented for all heirs.

It was a rich family history my ancestors left behind when immigrating to the United States in 1881. My Great-grandfather, Ernest, fell in love with a maid, my great-grandmother Barbara. They were secretly married. As Ernest was a personal guard for Kaiser Wilhelm I, the marriage was not supported by the German government. My great grandparents were warned of a plan to kidnap the children and dissolve the marriage. (Murder, I believe). To avoid the political repercussion of an unsavory match, the family

escaped to America where they changed the name to VanDusartz. After all, the Kaiser was looking for a German family, not Dutch. Barbara was 16 years old. The family history simply states that Ernest was older. I'm not sure how he managed it, but Ernest did not reveal his age. In case you are wondering, the topic is not open for discussion.

My Grandfather Peter was the third son born born to Barbara and Ernest in America. In 1922 Peter married my grandmother Rose Griesgraber.

My father, Donald, was the second child of Peter and Rose Van Dusartz. The eldest son of the union between Pete and Rose was born in 1929, the start of the Great Depression. My father grew to be 5'10," far shorter than his 6"1" father. His was a stocky build. As a young man he had a full-head of coal black hair. Unfortunately, he was bald by the time he was thirty. Only a black halo stretched from one ear to the other. His French ancestors must have had a hand in his coloring, bequeathing an olive skin-tone. My tall, fair, blond German grandparents must have wondered until my Uncle Peter was born. The brothers share the same dark, barrel-chested, shiny domed physical characteristics.

My Dad's childhood was marked with loss. Work was hard to come by for my Grandfather, a carpenter, so the family moved between Chicago, Illinois and St. Paul Minnesota, leaving behind their household possessions twice during the depression. There simply was not enough money to rent a truck. When my father was three years old, his family's car was hit by a drunk driver in downtown St. Paul. His oldest sister, Cecil, the only girl born to my grandparents, died at age eight.

As he ages, my father is becoming more comfortable talking about past tragedies.

"I remember my mother lying down and screaming on the sidewalk. Grandpa was hurt. I went up to the man who was driving the truck and started hitting his legs. My sister was gone."

My grandmother was so traumatized by her only daughter's death that she could not attend Cecil's funeral. Rose was eight months pregnant with my Uncle Peter at the time of the accident. She went into premature labor and the baby survived. My grandfather was badly injured and was hospitalized. At age three, my father became the heir apparent in the German family: the oldest child, the eldest male.

True to the VanDusartz' family heritage, during World War II my father defied his parents at age seventeen by dropping out of high school and joining the Navy. He was on a battleship in the Pacific during the heavy fighting that marked the end of the war with Japan.

There are very few facts Dad has passed on to his family about WWII. When I was 24, I received one of my few inheritances from my mother: her cedar chest. The cedar chest had not been opened in the ten years that followed my mother's death. I reached down to the bottom and came up with a silk square.

"Dad, what's this?"

My father looked over to me and watched as I unfolded the ivory square.

"Oh, you don't get that, give it to me."

"But Dad, what is it?"

"That's the scarf worn by the Kamikaze pilot who hit my ship during the war."

"Did you take the scarf off the Kamikaze? Is that why you got to keep his scarf?"

My father never talked about World War II. It was ancient history. All I knew is that he had lied about his age in order to serve in the Navy.

"No, the captain gave it to me because I was standing next to my best friend when the plane hit my ship. My friend died from the shrapnel."

My father took the scarf and left the room. The history lesson was over.

Five years ago, my father called me from his house in Minnesota. He was closing his northern home and asked if I wanted anything. I thought for a few moments. I already owned items that reminded me of Mother. I wanted something that had belonged to only my father. There were few items I could claim that would be a symbol of him. Finally I remembered the dragon.

"Has anyone asked for the Japanese china, Dad? If not, I would like the set."

"Oh honey. Of course. No one else asked for it, it's yours."

So now I am the proud owner of an elaborate Japanese tea set. There are three teapots, six finger bowls and six china cups with matching saucers. I can only imagine the eighteen year-old male who purchased the set. His ship was sent to Hiroshima after the atomic blast to clean up. The tea set is black with a gold and red dragon that swirls around the entire piece in relief. The dragon's mouth serves as the teapot's opening. My father never allowed anyone to serve tea from the dragon's belly. Neither have I.

After the war, my father returned to the United States and held various office jobs. He met my mother when they both worked in an office in downtown St. Paul. He pursued my mother, but she was not interested and left to live in Portland, Oregon. My father decided to leave the state also and went to live in California. He worked at Lockheed

making jet planes. Lonely, at night he drew, honing a natural talent. Finally, he mustered enough courage to apply at Walt Disney for a job as an artist. Disney offered him a position as a cartoonist and just as he went to accept the job, his mother called him back to St. Paul. Grandmother needed my father's help. He packed up and left California.

Dad used a bit of reverse psychology to win my mother's affection. One afternoon mother called her parents' home from Oregon. When my grandmother answered the phone, she informed mother that my father was at the house. Her younger sister was making him breakfast, would she like to speak to him? "No, let me talk to Joyce." Mother was livid at her younger sister for horning in on her territory. She told off Joyce, clearly stating "Don is my man! Stay away." Shortly after the breakfast incident my mother moved back from Oregon. Dad and Mom dated. Less than a year after mother's return they were married in the cathedral in St. Paul. My parents married late according to 1950s standards. They were 25 years old.

The family grew quickly with the birth of a son nine months after the wedding. Then a daughter was born two years later. My father became a carpenter to support his family, leaving artistry a hobby he practiced in the basement when time allowed. Until I was born four years after my older sister, my Dad maintained his pilot's license. He flew alone for fun. Responsibility grounded him, and he never returned to the sky as a pilot. When the fourth child, my baby sister Kay, was born 16 months after me, he started taking on side jobs for extra money.

My mother, Audrey, was the second daughter of William and Helen Davenport. William claimed a mixed heritage, although the surname is English. Helen was 100%

Norwegian and that ethnicity permeated their lives.

Wilma was the oldest child of William and Helen. When Helen was pregnant with her second child, my mother Audrey, Wilma was a precocious two year old. Helen felt that she needed family help with the birth of the new baby. So, Audrey was born in Anoka, Minnesota, where Helen's family lived. Soon after the birth, Helen and her daughters returned to the Davenport residence, a two-bedroom craftsman house in North St. Paul. There were two other girls who followed Audrey: Joyce and Patricia. All four girls shared the same bedroom the entire time they lived in the house.

Before she was married, my Grandmother, Helen, taught school in a one-room schoolhouse in South Dakota. It was important to Helen that her daughters were cultured. There were piano lessons, and Audrey also played the violin. The girls were also taught the skills women were expected to know in that time period. They were proficient in sewing, cooking, cleaning and needle work. All would make great wives.

After working in an office in St. Paul, Audrey decided she would relocate to her Aunt Phyllis's in Portland, Oregon. She needed time to think about her life. On the long drive across country with her sister Wilma, the girls noticed a car of men who were also traveling across the country. It was a good natured race from town to town. The females and males never stopped to meet each other.

After a few years working in Portland, Audrey decided to come home to reconnect with my father in Minnesota. Her adventure was over. Yet, the Northwest always called to her. My father always said that if nothing else could calm my mother, he would conjure up the image of Mount Hood. That mountain moved her soul every time.

Audrey suffered from a bout of rheumatic fever when I was born. Her heart was damaged by the disease, and she was considered delicate. Now in addition to being a petite individual, Audrey would never again be a robust, hardy person. She was not truly a beautiful woman; her nose was too prominent for the social definition of pretty. Her eyes were a light blue that twinkled behind her horn-rimmed glasses.

My mother's side of the family was close. Quite often my mother would take my younger sister and me over to my Grandmother's for coffee while the older kids were in school. I had just turned five and went to afternoon kindergarten.

"Girls, go out to the porch to play while I talk to Grandma."

Kay and I ran to "our" room. The unheated porch on the front of the house held the treasures purchased for our visits, new coloring books and a 64 box of Crayola crayons. Heaven for girls used to hand-me-downs. We played as Mom and Grandma permed Mom's fine hair.

"Okay girls, let's go!"

It was on the way home from my Grandparents' house that my mother first stopped for a meal for the three of us at a new restaurant.

"Girls, look! McDonald's is open! Should we stop?"

I wasn't really hungry, it was only 10:00 in the morning. But, I wanted to see what was under the huge Golden Arches.

"What does the sign say, Mommy?" Kay was only four and did not read yet.

"Over 500 served. They must be good hamburgers. I hope they are as good as White Castle. Let's go in."

"Okay! Wait until I tell Dave and Cindy!" I squirmed at the thought of having something before my older siblings.

"No, let's keep this our secret, Shari. I'll bring your brother and sister another day. This is our special treat."

Like most women in the 1960s Mom wore housedresses at home when she was cleaning. Formal occasions called for fitted dresses and suits with a matching hat. She regarded three-inch stiletto heels as a mandatory accessory. Balancing on the narrow heels was the only way she no longer felt inferior to the rest of the world. Every night she used dippity-do and booby pins to curl her straight, fine, cut short, light-brown hair to achieve face framing soft curls. She was a Mom.

My brother David was the first born. The only son. Dave was Mom's boy. It was Mom's skin coloring that I shared with my brother. He was the first left-handed person in the family. The mystery of where that came from was a matter of debate. In the 1960s to be left handed indicated a lower level of functioning. Dave felt the wrath in school, at home, and knew he was different due to favoring the "wrong hand."

My father and Dave always had an acerbic relationship. This has more to do with birth order than any real conflict, I think. Both are eldest sons. However, David was the favored child in the family. He was the one who played in Little League. Dave ski-jumped competitively on the weekends. He had a room of his own.

Dave had always been overweight. He was a round-faced kid who was picked on mercilessly due to his body-type. He also had a lisp. Even at the Catholic schools, the

nuns could not prevent the abuse.

Dave and I always got along. I was the tom-boy who would play football, baseball, and other physical games outside in the backyard.

I could also take Dave's teasing.

"Hey, Shari."

"What?"

"Did you know that if you stand sideways and stick out your tongue you look like a zipper?"

"Ha, ha, Dave."

One Fourth of July, one of the neighbors had given us charcoal snakes. Kay and I got into them one afternoon. We stood on our back stoop with a book of matches. I lit the first snake on a piece of aluminum foil. Kay watched the glowing ember expand into a long line. She wanted a turn. As the older sister, I hesitated to give her the book of stolen matches from the kitchen. I carefully gave her a lesson on how to light the match safely.

"Now Kay, just rip out just one match. Close the book, run the red end along the rough black edge – not towards you, but away from you, Kay."

We were in our standard summer clothes. Jean shorts and sleeveless linen tops. Kay had lucked out in the last delivery of second-hand clothes from the neighbors. Her shirt stopped right above her belly-button and the bottom third was a twisted fringe that swayed when she walked.

Carefully Kay followed my directions without success. Kay's frustration mounted. If I could light a match, surely she could light one too. I watched as my sister broke my

rule and pulled the match toward herself, directly into the fringe on her shirt. This time she was successful. I screamed as the dry linen went up in flames like kindling.

Dave flew out the back door, pushing me off the stoop and ripped the shirt over Kay's head. Luckily she was not burned badly. I was in trouble. I should never have stolen the matches. Letting Kay try to light one was a grievous offense. I couldn't sit for a week without wincing after my father spanked me.

My older sister Cindy was the second child from the union. The oldest daughter. The second of the left-handed children born into the family. For some reason, this quirk of fate was not as hard on Cindy as it was on Dave. She had dark hair, brown eyes and my father's round body type. Her hair was fine and straight like Mom's. Cindy was a reader.

Dad took us to the public library once a week. Cindy would check out the maximum number of books and return them each week, having read them all from cover to cover. Cindy and I were the ones who liked school. Dave and Kay did not enjoy academics. I read too, but I preferred to be outside, playing football, baseball, or kickball in the street with the neighbor kids. Cindy never joined in the games. She stayed in the house with Mom. Mom would crochet and Cindy would read. I assume that they talked a lot. I don't really know. I was too busy filling my time with activity.

Cindy was exactly three years and 364 days older than me. I don't think she ever forgave me for being born. I usurped her princess status in the family. She was daddy's girl. Then, not quite four years later I was born. She took every opportunity to let me know I was not quite as sophisticated, smart, or beautiful as she. I was unworthy.

In retrospect, I think it may have been jealousy that prevented us from ever being close. My birth was the reason my mother's health was delicate. Then there was image. While Cindy resembled my father, I had inherited my mother's small body size, but with height. To be tall and thin was an affront. Plus, my skin tone was lighter, and the greatest offense of all, I was a natural blond. While Kay and Dave would shrivel in response to Cindy's acerbic comments, I gave them back. When I was little, I demanded a lot of attention. I was the sensitive child, always needy, always the focus of the family environment. I think I took too much of my parent's attention away from the former youngest child for her to ever forget.

Cindy changed the spelling of her name as she entered adolescence. I just could not understand her changing her name.

"From now on, I am going to be Cindy with an 'i.'"

"What's the difference?"

"My name is still Cindy; I'm just going to spell it with an i instead of a y."

"But why?"

"Because I like it better."

"But WHY?"

"Leave me alone Shari, I don't tell you how to spell your name."

Cindi challenged me to a sandwich contest. The rules? Who could make the best sandwich with the available ingredients. We both started with the white bread my father purchased in bulk from the day-old bread store. Cindi opted for peanut butter. I chose braunschweiger. After the main ingredient, there were no holds barred. Cindi went for the

sweet stuff -- honey, sugar, (there was no jelly), and sprinkles. I added mustard, mayo and took the last of the Happy's potato chips and crushed the already broken dredges fine and mashed them into the liver paste. Cindi finished hers off with a sprinkling of the candy decorations we used on top of sugar cookies.

Dave and Kay were the judges. Cindi's sandwich won the award for best-looking. However, my sandwich was judged to be the most edible. We split the sandwich in four. Still hungry, we made toast and smeared the browned bread with the last of the peanut butter. That was lunch.

Cindi retreated back to her room to listen to her 45 records while reading. I went out to play football with my brother. Kay watched.

When I was seven, I was sick. My Mom stopped by to say a quick hello to Grandma on the way home from the doctor's where I had yet another shot of penicillin for my sore throat. Mom always bought me a small toy at the 5 & 10 next to the doctor's on the main street of North Saint Paul. However, it was the promise of a visit to my grandmother's kitchen that quelled my tears after the long needle filled with white goop assaulted my behind.

Feeling sorry for me, knowing that I could not yet sit after the invasion on my backside, my grandmother allowed me to join the women in the kitchen. She rose and went over to the always filled cookie jar.

She reached in and located my favorite cookie: Peanut butter with chocolate stars.

Grandmother handed the two cookies in a white napkin.

"Here's a cookie for my favorite granddaughter."

Oh man, I was her sixth granddaughter. I felt so privileged. No child was awarded extra sweets. Limits were determined and adhered to. I had been selected.

I rode contentedly home with my mother, looking at the farms along McKnight Road and laughing through my sore throat with the knowledge my grandmother loved me best. As the third child and second daughter, such distinction was rare for me.

The phone was ringing when we opened the kitchen door. My grandfather asked my mother to go get a neighbor lady to come over before he continued the conversation. Once he was assured that my mother had another adult in the house, he told mother that grandma had dropped dead from a heart attack on the kitchen floor right after we departed.

It wasn't my fault. That is what my parents told me. How I missed my grandmother. The smell of butter and sugar no longer permeated her house. My grandfather, aunt and cousin still lived there, but it seemed empty without my Grandmother's aproned presence. My stomach started bothering me the day of her funeral. Dressed in our Sunday clothes, the family gathered after the funeral in the Lutheran church. I nearly fainted when I met my great aunt from South Dakota for the first time. She was my grandmother's twin. I thought grandma had returned until Dave whispered in my ear, telling me that my grandmother had a sister from another state.

In the large breakfront in the oak dining room were my Grandmother's cherished positions. She had collected fine china cups and saucers for all of her adult life. It was the only luxury in the home where she raised four daughters. All of her daughters and granddaughters gathered to divide the spoil. My grandfather wanted the relics of his wife

removed. One by one we choose the piece we wanted. As the second youngest granddaughter, only my sister Kay ranked lower than I in the hierarchy. I picked a fluted cup in a light rose print. That alone was my inheritance from my Grandmother.

My stomach did not settle. For months my mother brought me to the doctor where diagnosis after diagnosis proved wrong. In desperation for a reason I could not keep down any food, I was hospitalized for tests. My mother stayed with me during the day while the other kids were in school. At night I stayed alone in the children's ward of St. John's Hospital in St. Paul, working on the craft of the day. I was allowed to have one free activity from the cart that the candy striper brought in the afternoon, including puzzles, paintings, weaving kits and other quiet diversions.

After ruling out every known ailment known to the medical profession, I was sent home with a prescription of tranquilizers. The green liquid that was dispensed twice a day left my teeth coated with a slime that did not go away with a toothbrush. My stomach settled and I started gaining weight again. For six months I dutifully swallowed the green slime. Then, mother decided I could survive life's challenges without help.

Once I learned to cope with life without drugs, I became the outgoing child. I was a tomboy who played football and baseball in the backyard. I danced; I was in gymnastics until I grew too tall. I was in Bluebirds, Girl Scouts, and student government. If there was a group, I joined.

The St. Paul Winter Carnival was always a highlight of the gloomy Minnesota winters. Every morning we check the St. Paul Pioneer Dispatch for clues as to where the Carnival medallion was hidden in the city. Another event was the ski-jumping

competition. The winter I turned eight years old the entire family bundled up in the warmest clothes possible and ventured out to Battle Creek to watch Dave practice on Saturday afternoon.

"Daddy, I want to try."

"Shari, you are not old enough."

I watched as the skiers tromped up the narrow stairs to the 20 foot jump. We observed from the side of the landing area. The landing was groomed into a soft bowl shape, with a long straight run at the bottom. Boy after boy climbed the stairway with their clunky jumping boots on. Wooden skis balanced between the elbow and shoulder, the pine boards saluting the sky.

"Those boys are younger than me!"

"Shari, I don't have skis for you. Dave's are too big. You can't ski.

A man standing next to us looked at my Dad.

"My boy's skis would fit her."

"Please, daddy? I just want to try!"

I jumped up and down, pulling on my dad's thick black wool coat. He looked down at me.

"You can't go off the jump. If you want to try to go down the landing hill, fine."

Grudgingly, the man's son removed his ski boots and handed them to me. I sat on the ground and took off my own snow boots and gave them to the boy. He snorted and stood in the snow in his heavy wool socks, refusing my girly footwear. My dad tightened the laces until I thought my feet would fall off. Then the man and Dad eased me into the

heavy ski bindings.

"See, Daddy! I can ski." I moved my feet back and forth, gliding by millimeters towards the hill.

"Now hold on Shari, I have to go talk to the man measuring the jumps. We'll see if they'll let you go down the hill soon."

The boy whose gear I was wearing sneered at me. "Girls don't ski jump. I bet you'll fall flat on your face."

Dad got the okay and placed me at the top of the landing. In ski jumping there are no poles. When he gave me a push down the concave surface, I stayed upright until the end of the landing. I did not fall. I sat down at the end of my run. My dad's applause and whistles encouraged me as I removed the skis and trudged back up the hill.

My younger sister is the third daughter, the fourth child. Kay is only 16 months younger than me and has always lived in my shadow. She was my playmate from the time she was born. She was also my responsibility. If something went wrong, it was my fault. I was older and should have known better. Kay was an interesting mix of my parents. The older three children definitely resembled one or another of our parents. Kay's round head was framed with blond hair a shade darker than mine. Her skin was just a little lighter in tone than my father and Cindi's. Although we were only a year and four months apart, I towered over Kay. She had not inherited the coveted tall gene.

The spring after I turned five Kay and I were sent out to play. It had rained earlier in the day, so I mimicked my Mother and Grandmother by cooking with the mud. I made beautiful mud pies and put them on the sidewalk to cook. Kay, seeing my pies, came

over.

"Here, Kay. Do you want a piece of pie?"

"Those don't look like pies Shari. Where's the whipped cream?"

"These are special pies that you don't need whipped cream. Sure you don't want a bite? I made them just for you."

"Okay."

It seemed like a great game to me. What better way to spend a sunny summer afternoon? Cooking and eating pie? My mother, looking out the back door to check on us, was not amused. Why had I allowed my younger sister to eat dirt? I should know better.

Kay had her own unique way of garnering the spotlight. She was a notorious choker. Any food item larger than a pea caused my sister to choke, turn blue, and create a panic. All of us became adept at pounding Kay's back to dislodge whatever managed to get trapped in her gullet. Hard candy was forbidden in the house. Kay had no self-control and would swear this time she would not allow the sugary treat to escape the confines of her mouth. She couldn't even be trusted with ice cubes. Even when we told her it would melt, Kay choked to the point that someone would reach over and pound her between the shoulder blades until she spewed the cube across the room.

When I was seven, I could ride a two-wheeler without training wheels. One summer afternoon, the neighbor kids rode bikes to buy candy bars at the Tom Thumb store three miles away. Kay, not yet able to ride with us, plotted with our neighbor Markie LaRue to follow the older kids. Kay and Markie rode their trikes the three miles

from home to the drug store so they could buy candy just like the bigger kids with money stolen from Dad's dresser. The underage bandits hid behind a corner thinking the older kids would not notice their tricycles parked in the bike stand next to our two-wheelers.

Kay did not like being left behind.

Home

Donald and Audrey's VanDusartz's first house was in New Brighten, Minnesota. One day my father came home to a "For Sale" sign in the front yard. My mother had decided that New Brighten was simply too far away from her family. She wanted to live closer to her parents' home in North Saint Paul. My father began constructing a new three-bedroom ranch house in the St. Paul suburb of White Bear Lake, the adjoining suburb to North St. Paul. White Bear was a bustling bedroom community where the white-collar and blue-collar employees of the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company (3M) found solace.

The community had easy access to the Interstate system that dominated the cities, while maintaining the small-town lake community that populated the northern reaches of the cities. White Bear Lake had a colorful history, first as a sacred meeting place for the Indian tribes native to the region. The town was named for the large spring-fed lake home to Manitou Island, where Indian lore told of a sacred white bear who lived on the Island.

In the 1920s and 1930s, White Bear Lake was a playground for the wealthy. Great mansions were built along the north shoreline as summer homes for the prosperous milling industrialists who made their fortune grinding flour on the mighty Mississippi. An amusement park and high class hotels completed the town's vacation environment. Old-timers claimed Bonnie and Clyde frequently took their vacation in the town just

north of the Twin Cities. By the time my parents built their new home, wealthy industrialists still maintained the mansions on the northern shore. The track housing for the post WWII optimists that spawned the baby-boom generation filled the land mass to the southern edge of the town's boundary.

White Bear Lake. A clean, blue-collar suburb where families attended either St. Pious X Catholic Church or St. John's Lutheran Church. There was also a Baptist church, but we didn't know anyone who went there.

The families who lived along the lake's shores had boat houses with sailboats and motor boats. There was a marina where those who resided along the wide straight streets of town could moor their boats for a fee. The year I was born, my paternal grandparents bought a pontoon boat and kept it in the marina for frequent Sunday family outings. I learned to walk on the boat. No one thought it strange. The lake was just another constant in our existence. We fished there, we learned to swim there, we boated if someone took us. White Bear Lake was our playground.

We were a most-learned blue-collar family. In the morning the St. Paul Pioneer press was delivered to our door. In the afternoon the St. Paul Dispatch landed on the front stoop. One clear memory I have of my mother takes place during a mother's golden hour -- the hour before the kids arrive home from school when the lunch dishes are done and the house is straightened for the family's return home.

Kay and I were off somewhere and had tip-toed back into the house without Mom detecting us. We spied on our mother from the kitchen, peeking around the corner to catch our mother in the simple act of being herself – a rare event.

Mother in blue-jean pedal pushers, an ironed white blouse crisply tucked into the slim waist-band, was lying in the middle of the living room floor on her stomach. With her legs crossed at her slim ankles, knees bent, swaying slightly, she leisurely read the paper. My mother seemed content with her life.

My father was a carpenter by trade. He left the house before the sun rose every morning with a metal lunch box and a thermos of coffee for his day. He wore navy blue work pants and a button-down shirt over a white undershirt. His socks were heavy, white sweat socks purchased through the Sears catalog. His boots showed the stamina of the heavy work he performed. They faded to a soft doe-colored brown. There were twelve eyelets for the long laces. At the end of the day, he sat and took off his shoes and his socks - black from the sweat and sawdust that seeped through the soft leather. He was a solid man, his muscles bigger than that man on TV, Jack LaLane. No one was as strong as my daddy.

In the basement my father drew when he had time. When I was six years old he put one of his pictures in the Minnesota State Fair. The entire family attended the fair that year just to see his picture on display. In front of the Agricultural Building there was a bridge where all the art work in the competition is displayed.

"Daddy, which picture did you put in again?"

"The dog."

"Why didn't you put in the horse?"

"That's at Grandma Rose's. Keep looking, it's got to be here somewhere."

"Hey Dad! I found it." We all look to Dave who has made it up to the arch of the

bridge. Dad grabs my hand, Mom grabs Kay's hand and we scurry up to where the picture is displayed on an easel.

"Second place! Audrey, I got second place! Well, what do you know?"

"I'm so proud Don. See, I told you."

I looked at the pencil drawing of the dog. At his desk in the basement my father had worked on the dog picture for months. He used his special charcoal pencils that he kept in a lined box. Any lines he did not like he erased with a special eraser that was so soft, it crumbled if you picked it up.

The dog was a sad-eyed basset hound. The next year the same image was on the Hush Puppy box of the shoes we bought for school. My dad thought it was his dog, but he didn't pursue the issue. He had won second place at the fair.

We were a Catholic family. No questions about that one. My mother had converted from her childhood faith – Lutheran – in order to marry my father in the cathedral in downtown St. Paul. Her white dress packed lovingly into the cedar chest professed the depth of the union. Catholic. Four children. The last two unplanned. My mother was never a healthy woman, and her tiny body struggled to bear four children. My father struggled to support a large family. He worked as a carpenter and took as many side jobs as possible. Yet, we managed the middle class existence so prevalent as my parents' generation produced the baby boomer generation. The youngest children of my parents' marriage barely made the cut, 1959 and 1961. The family of Donald VanDusartz met society's status quo. That included attending our church every Sunday.

My Dad ushered in the church for as long as I can remember. The rest of the family sat together in one of the front pews. Dad stood guard at the rear exits, at the ready for any emergency.

The story of me, Sharon, aka Shari, begins on an off-note. I was born shortly after the final nail went into the classic three bedroom home my father built in White Bear Lake at my mother's request. The legend I know proclaims that when my mother went to the doctor for the standard Mom and baby six-week post-birth check-up, I was found healthy and was allowed to return home. However, my mother was diagnosed with rheumatic fever and transported to the hospital from the doctor's office. I have no record of how long she was hospitalized. There is only one picture of that time. I have been laid in my mother's lap. Mom is in her dressing gown with the bow tied neatly at her throat, she looks lovingly at me as I squirm, no arms holding me in place. I guess she did not have the strength to caress my tiny body.

My father coped with the help of my Aunt Wilma. Just one month before my birth, her husband Norm died at the age of 35 from complications of diabetes. It did not take long for me to become "Wilma's girl." My dad worked during the day, and in the evenings came home to care for his three small children alone. Dave was six, Cindi four, and I was the newborn who inspired the pencil drawings he created alone in the basement after the kids went down at eight for bed.

Shortly after my mother came home from the hospital, she became pregnant again. Just sixteen months after my birth, my baby sister was born. My christened name was Sharon Lynn. In a moment of insanity, my parents named my little sister Karen

Elaine. As I was just learning how to speak, I slaughtered my baby sister's name and bestowed on her the best name ever: Kay-Kay. It wasn't until she went to school that she dropped the second Kay.

As we both answered to my given name, my family shortened my first name to Shari. Thus the Irish twins, tow-headed petite girls contrasting with the darker haired David and Cindi, joined the perfect family. All of us knew our mother was delicate. She napped in the afternoons in order to gain strength for evenings. We were expected to behave and not cause her any grief. To do so resulted in being sent to our bedroom until my father came home from work as a carpenter. Spankings ensued for any behavior my mother found offensive, and Kay and I quickly learned to stay on the side of seen and not heard girls. We played quietly with our toys in our room, putting everything away when we were finished. My job was Kay. I was her keeper from the time I could follow directions.

I have very few memories of my mother before the accident. Those I remember most clearly take place in my Grandmother's kitchen. My Grandparent's classic bungalow had a front porch that housed the piano that all of the Davenport girls learned to play on. My Aunt Wilma claimed that in her youth my mother also played the violin. My mother did not discuss her musical abilities. My father was the performer, an accomplished singer with the voice that sounded exactly like Perry Como's on the television variety shows so popular at the time. I never heard my mother play.

Although the porch was on the front of the house, it was always through the back door that we entered. Dave and Cindi were school age, and my mother would go over to

Grandmother's for morning coffee on the days she dropped my father off at the Minnesota Mining Company for work as a staff carpenter. As every other family I knew, we owned one car. Most days Mom was home without transportation. Only on special occasions were we mobile. Most days were spent in the home, with weekly coffee klatches in neighboring houses.

On those rare days mother had the car, Mom would take Kay and me over to Grandma's. If the weather cooperated, we were sent out to the front lawn for our favorite game. "Find the hidden stairs." When my mother had been a girl, the house had a grand stair case that climbed the hilled yard and created a majestic entrance to the house near the end of the street. At some time my grandparents felt the auspicious entrance had to go and my grandfather had sodded over the stairs. It was our task to find the buried treasure. Kay and I would follow what we thought was the logical path to the missing steps and search with our feet for the tell-tale edges that announced the location of the cement steps. We spent hours searching for the stairs.

Walking in the back door of my grandparents' home, one entered the narrow hallway that held coats, boots and any other clothing not deemed worthy in the blistering white kitchen. Dirt stopped in the entry; it was not welcome in the house.

On days that did not allow us to search for the hidden steps, Kay and I were given the job of trying to get the marbles left in the decorative holes in the wainscoting that ran along the bottom of the back entryway. The devious child who had tried to hide favorite marbles had been wily. Although there were four suspects, none of my aunts or mother would take credit for the act. The mystery of who had defaced the wainscoting was never

solved. Yet, we admired the person who left behind their mark. The holes were perfect. While the marbles were not hidden from view, as hard as we might try all Kay and I managed to do in our hours of rescue attempts was to turn the marbles over and over. The old wood did not give up its treasure.

The women ate home-baked coffee cake and drank black coffee. Snippets of conversation would drift to our hideout in the entryway.

"Oh, Kathleen had her baby last week."

"Wasn't she married just last June?"

"Now Audrey, I know you can count, but you don't need to bring that up, do you?" "Did you hear about Edwin?"

Boring conversations for young girls.

Kay and I were not adults and therefore were expected to entertain ourselves. So we did, finding activities that did not disturb the women who ate Norwegian cookies and cakes with their coffee with bright sunshine streaming in through the kitchen window above the polished laminate of the table where coffee ruled.

Minnesota winters can be brutal. Our family always went to St. Pious X church together, unless it was a dire emergency. My mother did not believe in leaving a child home alone ill. One Sunday my father went to his normal mass with the well children tow he usher. Mother was to drive herself to a later service. My father, not wanting the windows to frost back over in the 20 minutes between his arrival from the first mass and my mother's departure, propped the gas pedal with a wood block and left the car running in the driveway.

My mother went out the side kitchen door in her hose, heels, and thick wool coat wearing her leather driving gloves. Mother forgot about the propped gas pedal. She put the car in reverse. The car shot backwards, my mother frantically pumping the brake pedal, to no avail. The car propelled down our driveway, shot across the street gaining momentum, and continued its straight line course up the neighbors' lawn and hit their house with a loud thud.

Dave, Cindi, Kay, and I gathered in our front room's picture window looking at our car wedged in the neighbor's house. My father flew out the front door.

"Audrey! What the hell did you do?"

My mother sat stunned in the car.

"I wasn't even touching the gas, Don. Did I hurt anyone?"

"No, Audrey. Are you okay?"

My mother sat shaking. "I think so."

My dad lifted my mother from the car, setting her down in the snow, holding her in an upright position. In the house all four kids watched in amazement as our father tenderly checked my mother for physical harm, all the while tenderly whispering in her ear . He half carried her back home afterwards. He gave Dave direct orders to keep the kids away from Mom.

Trudging back across the street, he knocked on the neighbor's front door.

"I'm sorry, but my wife ran into your house."

The neighbor looked outside and noted the lack of damage from our family's car ascent that ended where his house sat on top of the hill. Miraculously only the bumper of

the car sustained damage.

"That's okay. We overslept and needed to get up anyway."

In a rare moment of domesticity, Dad filled the brass teakettle and made mother a cup of tea. Gingerly, he brought her back to their bedroom, and served her the hot tea in bed.

In family lore, my mother always blamed the incident on my father: he should have moved the seat back up to where she could reach the pedals. He should have reminded her he had propped the gas pedal. He should have.... my father never said a word.

California

My father firmly believed in extensive family vacations every few years. When I was five, he and my mother loaded up the family sedan and followed Highway 10 west in 1964. Both of my parents had lived on the west coast in their early twenties. My mother lived in Oregon, and my father lived in Los Angeles. From our home in White Bear Lake Minnesota, our family of six packed for a two-week vacation, traveling across the United States car, staying in motels until we arrived at my father's relatives homes in New Mexico and then on to Los Angeles where we would go to Disneyland.

"The Mickey Mouse Club" was the only parentally approved children's television program our family watched regularly. My mother believed that children should be outside, so unlike most of our friends, we watched very little of the flickering images in black and white in our living room. The box labeled the "boob tube" by my parents was not considered a child's domain. Daddy promised in five days I would be able to see Mickey Mouse in person. I just had to behave in the car. The ride might be uncomfortable, with Dave, ten, Cindi, eight, Kay, four and me at five all crammed into the back seat. However, if we were good, we could take turns sitting in front on the space between Mom and Dad.

Somewhere on the flats of Oklahoma, the smell of cow infiltrated the car. There was no air-conditioning, so all windows were rolled down. Between the smell, the constant whistling from the rush of air as the car sped across the flat terrain, and the

closeness of six people vying for non-existent fresh air, the mood in the car was sullen. I was wedged in the back seat between Kay and Dave. My shift for the coveted front row seat was not due for another day and a half. I leaned my head on Kay's shoulder and she pushed me off.

"It's too hot. Stay on your own side of the car, Shari." Kay wiggled in her seat, forcing me to the other inch of available space on the other side of the car.

Sighing, I tried to rest on Dave's shoulder. My blond hair rested on his bicep. The smell of cow dung made my stomach churn. My head weighed so much; I could not hold it upright. It was like my neck was made of jello, it simply would not support the weight of my head. Dave put his hand on my head to shove me off and let out a cry. "Jeez Shari, do you feel okay?"

I shook my head, my stomach reeling from the motion. I really did not feel okay. Dave leaned forward to whisper in my Mom's ear. My head flopped down behind him, filling the recently vacated space between his back and the seat. I tried to sit up, but my body kept going down, until it met the bench exposed by Dave's movement forward. "Mom, Shari is burning up!"

My mother turned to face the back seat, twisting until her arm could touch the only part of my body still within reach. As her cool hand met with the skin between my knee and thigh, I relished the cool contact. Her hand jumped back over the divide between the front and back seats of the car. "Don!"

My dad kept his eyes on the ribbon of highway cutting through the middle of the country. It was desolate on the plains. Our car was the only moving object for miles,

cows stood in brown pastures, chewing their cuds in the heat as the white torpedo sped past, trying to cover as many miles as possible during the daylight hours. He nodded his acknowledgment.

"Shari has a fever. We have to stop."

"The next town isn't for another fifty miles, can we wait Audrey?" My dad's irritation at a proposed delay in his carefully planned itinerary was evident. My Dad planned the travel portion of vacations carefully. There were few towns to stop at in the wide open spaces of Oklahoma, and the last thing my father wanted was for the family stuck in the middle of nowhere overnight.

"No, you better pull over to the side of the road."

Dad eased the car onto the dusty shoulder and Dave turned to awkwardly scoop me off the seat. Mom opened her door and told Cindi to move to the backseat. Protesting that it was still her turn to sit up front, Cindi reluctantly slid across the vinyl out onto the shoulder beside Mom. Mom opened Dave's door and took me from his arms. Dad stayed behind the wheel, the car idling as the transfer took place. Cindi looked at Mom holding me on the side of the road. My head formed to Mom's shoulder. Her skin was so cool, it felt like an icepack against my burning forehead until the heat from my body transferred to her skin, radiating in the glare of a plains summer. The shimmer of heat let off waves until I moved my burning head to a new, uncontaminated spot. Cindi spoke: "Okay, but I am not sitting in the middle,"

Mom sighed, "Kay, scooch over and let Cindi have the middle."

"No, I want the window," Kay tried to hold her ground.

Dad turned his head to the side so that Kay had a full view of his strong profile. We knew better than to argue with Dad. If you didn't cooperate, the muscles honed by years as a carpenter would wield the calloused open palm to your rear-end and a week of delicate movement would follow. Getting a spanking in our family was avoided at all costs.

"Move like your Mother told you to." With Dad's edict, Kay slid to the middle of the back seat. You did not argue with Dad. Ever.

Cindi walked around the car and took Kay's spot. Space allotments were negotiated in the back seat with Kay valiantly defending a few precious inches of space on the clammy red vinyl. Mom shut Dave's door and gently eased herself onto the front passenger's seat, holding my torso while my angular lower half spread itself out across the middle. I bent my knees to avoid touching my Dad. As Dad slipped the car back into drive, Mom put her cool hand on my forehead and then started to smooth the damp locks of hair on my head.

"Don, we'll have to stop. Her head is so hot! Shari, do you feel sick?" I slumped across my mother's lap and nodded. Talking just seemed impossible. I inhaled and smelled the cows that created a tunnel along the highway. Bile formed and threatened to fill my mother's lap. I started to wretch in an effort to control my body. "Don, stop the car!"

My mother reached over as Dad once again pulled off the road. She opened the car door and lifted me from the seat just as the contents of my stomach spewed onto the gravel.

This time my father turned off the car. “Jeez Louise, Audrey, didn't you know she was sick?”

“No, Don. Can you get a wet towel for her head? And something for her to drink? I'll give her an aspirin and see if that helps.”

My dad made his way to the trunk. No cars passed us on the dusty road. In the back of my mind, I registered a novelty. I was going to get a drink before we stopped for the day. Wow. One of my father's coping mechanisms while traveling with four children was to ban the consumption of beverages on the road. Fewer bathroom breaks. Shortly Dad returned, his silver thermos coffee cup filled with ice cold water from the metal Coleman cooler in the trunk of the car. One of Dave's t-shirts dripped a pattern in the dust on the side of the road, creating little divots as each drop landed. “Hey – that's my last clean shirt!” Dave cried out in protest.

“I'll find a laundromat tonight Dave. Right now it's all we have and Shari needs your shirt worse than you do.”

With that, my Dad returned to his side of the car and my mother removed an aspirin from her purse. “Now Shari, I don't have any sugar, can you try to swallow the pill?”

I just stared at the white tablet. Swallow? Whenever I was sick, my mother would crush the tablet between two large tablespoons, reducing the aspirin disk to power. Then she would fill the spoon basin with white table sugar, and slowly drip in tap water until a pool of aspirin grains swam in the melted sugar water, coating my teeth and throat with minuscule aspirin remains until I drank a full glass of water, swishing like mouthwash to

dislodge all of the particles.

"Open wide" My mother took the pill and dropped it as far as possible down my throat. It stuck on my tonsils. "Here, now drink this as fast as you can."

Gagging, I gulped the ice cold water tinged with acerbic coffee undertones. It dislodged the tablet, and I felt the pill make its way past my tonsils traveling to my stomach. I wretched, but there was nothing left in my stomach, so the pill stayed down.

"Good Girl, now open wide and let me see your throat."

My Dad leaned across the seat towards the open passenger's door. "Is it red?" Our family had a propensity for strep throat, and the tell-tale inflamed corridor to my stomach pitted with white pustules was always the first home diagnosis.

"No, her throats' a little red, but not too much. I don't know. Maybe it's just the stomach flu."

"Get back into the car, Audrey; we'll stop at the next motel." My father's travel mission was set for the day. Our family could cope as long as we did not deviate from the set plans.

My mother deposited me once more in the middle of the front bench seat and wrung the excess water from Dave's shirt onto the road. She slid in beside me and shut the door. As Dad once again started the car, I put my head on her lap and she covered my forehead with the cold t-shirt. I gasped as the temperature change impacted my head; the throbbing initiated by improvised ice pack caused me to close my eyes. A shudder moved through my body and as I watched the red shapes behind my eyelids, my breathing became shallow and I drifted to sleep as my mother stroked my short blond hair, still

damp from fever and cooler water.

I woke up as my father carried me from the car to the hotel room with two double beds. One bed was for Mom and Dad and the other was reserved for the girls. Dave slept on the roll-away bed Dad requested at check-in. The room was claustrophobic when all six of us were in the room. Mom sent the other kids outdoors to explore, with strict instructions to keep a close eye on Kay.

"Shari, let's have a nice, cool bath."

My clothes were plastered to my body. The heat had generated so much sweat in the un-airconditioned car. I was sticky and my head pounded a steady beat in my brain. With concerted effort, I nodded once and lifted my arms so Mom could pull off the thin cotton shirt.

My mother gasped. Under my arms, in the soft, dark recesses were angry red welts, circular with a white head. The rest of my body was covered in lacy red hives. "Don, what is this?" My father peered and prodded the swollen area with his fingertip that was rough like sandpaper from working with his hands. Pain shot through my torso. "Daddy, don't touch it! That hurts!" I screamed for him to stop.

My father stepped away and addressed my mother. "I don't know. Put her in the bath and see if that helps." He stepped into the main room and shut the bathroom door in case the other kids came back.

The cool water washed over my burning skin. The heat was absorbed by the liquid and I leaned back, finally comfortable. My Mom sat with me in the small room and let me float, making sure I did not drift off to sleep. The pounding in my head had reduced to

a faint rhythm. When the sores were underwater, the stretched skin seemed to recede back where it belonged. My mother sat on the toilet while I lay in the tub. She had my dad retrieve her crocheting from the car and while I floated, she stitched away, making yet another doily to protect our furniture from irresponsible children who did not put their drinking glasses where they belonged.

It seemed like hours before my Dad knocked on the door and stuck in his head. "I asked at the front desk, there isn't a doctor until the next town. We are only ten hours from my cousin Mary's. Let's leave early and get to Mary's house tomorrow. She's a nurse, she'll know what to do."

Mom had given me aspirin in the pre-dawn hours when dad woke the family to get a jump start on the morning's journey. As always, mother served breakfast, the General Mills miniature cereal boxes that doubled as individual bowls if you opened the box along the corrugated lines running down the middle of the package. The waxy inner liner worked to keep the milk and cereal in one place without leaks if you ate quickly. I refused the milk and ate the contents dry. Mom let me have first choice from the variety pack, and I chose my favorite: Sugar Puffs. I washed the sticky nuggets down with the tepid, funny-tasting water that flowed from the bathroom tap in the hotel room. My stomach churned a bit, but the sugary mass did not come back up.

The ride went quickly during the daylight hours. Everyone dozed or stared numbly out the window as my father strove to put as many miles as possible behind us. Dad liked quiet. The car games of license plate bingo and sign alphabet sat unused in the back window. The only sound was the tires on the asphalt that echoed the sound of yarn

slowly pulled from the ball as my mother expanded the elaborate doily with the crochet hook.

It was after dusk that our mission was slowed. Wildlife emerged as the sun set. My dad competed with elk and deer for space on the highway. The car crawled through the herds who were not intimidated by our vehicle. As the projected arrival time came and went, my fever resurfaced. I felt like a limp noodle when we finally arrived at Mary's house long after dark. My dad peeled me off the vinyl and took me into the house.

Mary lived in a double wide trailer in El Paso, New Mexico with her husband and two sons. When the family exited the car, we were the only humans standing in the gravel where cactus served the same purpose as the elm trees in my front yard. The only sounds were the strain of machinery. I opened my eyes briefly for a snapshot and then closed them quickly as the rays penetrated my brain and turned up the volume on the drumbeat still playing in my head.

"Don! Audrey! You made it! Oh, what do we have here?" My father's cousin greeted us in the driveway.

My father leaned over me to kiss his cousin hello. "This is Shari. She started running a fever yesterday in the car."

A cool hand brushed over my head. "And she's running a fever still. Let me get a thermometer and see what her temp is now. Let's get you all in the house out of the heat."

The air in the house was dry and cool. I had never been in an air-conditioned house before.

Mary retrieved the glass tube with the silver bulb and stuck it in my mouth. "Now

keep that under your tongue, young lady. Don, go ahead and set her down on the couch." Mary turned to greet the rest of the family. Welcome to summer in New Mexico! I was thinking tomorrow we could head up into the mountains where it is a little cooler. It isn't fit for humans outside now."

Dave, Cindi, and Kay nodded in agreement. "Boys, come over and meet your,--now what would it be? Second or third cousins? I can never remember. Jeff, John, go ahead and show everyone where they're sleeping."

My mother sat next to me on the couch, stroking my hair and making sure I didn't spit out the thermometer. She stood, giving Mary a quick hug. "Hi, I am so sorry. I didn't mean to arrive with a sick child."

Mary and my mother were similar in build. Both were petite women, almost five-feet tall. They had slight frames and wore the fashion of the day, pedal pushers, white sleeveless button-up shirts and keds on their feet. Usually my mother was the shortest grown-up in the room. Beside Mary, she seemed to be average. "Let's see, does she have anything else besides the hives?" My mother nodded as Mary took the thermometer from my mouth. "101. Something's going on."

My mother looked at Mary. "Shari has red sores under her arms. They look like white heads, but much larger."

"Let's go into the bathroom and see what's what." She walked down the long center hallway and turned into the first door on the right. I shuffled behind my mother. I walked into the bathroom and took the only available seat, the toilet. I gazed around the small room. The washer and dryer were in the bathroom! In my home, the appliances

were in the kitchen. And, oh my gosh! The toilet paper was blue! Who ever heard of blue toilet paper? In fact, everything in the bathroom was a Robin's egg blue. The sink, the bathtub, the towels.

"Lift up your arms honey, let's see what's hurting you."

Dutifully, I again raised my arms, and my sleeveless green plaid cotton shirt slid over my head. I sat looking at the curious blue toilet paper as Mary inspected the strange sores under my arms. I liked Mary. She did not torment me by poking the red places.

"Do you have any other places that seem sore?" she asked.

I nodded and pointed to my thighs.

"Yesterday, she only had the sores under her arms. Take off your shorts, Shari, so we can see."

I stood and did as my mother asked.

"Oh dear." Mary's face puckered inward.

My mother lifted me up onto the toilet to stand. I crossed my arms over my chest as the women inspected the latest outbreak.

"Audrey, I think this is staph. Let me call one of the doctor's at the hospital and see what they say. Put your clothes back on, honey, and go watch TV with the other kids. You can sit in Uncle Mark's chair by yourself."

Mary consulted with a doctor who worked with her at the hospital. He called in a prescription for penicillin to the hospital pharmacy. The doctor gave Mary instructions to rid me of the infection brewing in my little body. Mary and my mother whispered and finally called me over as my father was sent out to pick up the medicine.

"Does anyone need to use the bathroom? You better go now." The other kids gave her a curious look and each took a turn using the facilities. I was last in line. "Shari, go ahead and take off your clothes and tell us when you are done." My mother looked at me with a resigned look.

I called them in and Mary and my mother filled the space in the bath. "Now honey, see the white tops on the pimples? That's the poison that is making you feel sick. We need to get out the poison." Mary opened the medicine cabinet above the sink and took out a bottle of alcohol and a razor blade. "Now I want you to lie on the counter as still as you can while I get the poison out. Your Mommy is going to hold you. When we're done you can have a bath."

Mary took a cotton ball and saturated it with alcohol. She rubbed it on the swelling under my arm. My nose stung. It felt like Mary was wiping my skin with an ice cube, not a cotton ball. Then she held the razor blade over the sink and poured alcohol over that too. "Close your eyes."

My mother's arms held me as Mary lanced each of the eruptions on my little body. I screamed as the blade cut through and the milky matter and was wiped away with alcohol. I was near hysterics by the time the procedure was done. Tears ran down my mother's face as she valiantly kept me still for each cut.

"There, now let's have a nice bath." Mary turned on the tub, filling it with lukewarm water. When the tub was nearly filled, she brought out the jug of Clorox bleach, the same bleach my mother used in the laundry at home. She measured a cup into the water. "A new type of bubble bath. Get in, make sure you don't get any in your

eyes."

I climbed in and screamed. The bleach water stung! I tried to get back out.

"No, Shari, you have to soak for half an hour. That's was the doctor said. How about I read you one of your comic books?" My Mom read to me the adventures of *Josey and the Pussycats* while I soaked in the water that looked clear but was slimy to the touch.

I was much better after three days. The family went on a picnic in the mountains. but Mom did not think that I was well enough to go climbing up the mountain path with everyone else. While the other kids left the picnic site to explore higher elevations, I sat at the table with Mary and Mom. It was beautiful. Pine trees towered above my head and the brown clay held tufts of grass. The temperature was so much cooler here in the dappled sunshine. I watched the procession with my dad and the other kids disappear up the path and sighed. My favorite thing in the world was adventure. I wanted to climb. I wanted to watch for bears and mountain lions. I did not want to sit at the picnic table covered by the red and white checkered cloth and listen to the women gossip about family. I found a twig and started to draw the alphabet in the dusty clay. A shadow passed over me. I looked up and saw a huge bird swoop over the tree tops. "That's a Bald Eagle, Shari."

I nodded and continued to draw in the dirt. Next I drew Mickey Mouse. Maybe by the time we reached Disney Land, I would be allowed to do something besides take bleach baths.

From Mary's house we traveled to her father's house: my dad's uncle Andy resided

in Los Angeles. Andy was a legend in family lore. My father told stories as our car covered the distance from Mary's trailer house to the California my father still loved. Andy was my grandmother's brother, a Griesgraber. Andy lived in Los Angeles in a large house and had a guest house on his property for us to stay in. No longer crammed into bunk beds with Kay and Cindi, I would have my own parcel of floor to camp on. Heaven. Dad warned us that Andy liked to pray extensively before meals. We were not to interrupt or sneak food. After all, Andy had three sons who were priests and two daughters who were nuns. The others, like Mary, were as devout as my father. Religion was serious business with Great-uncle Andy. His other passion was golf. In fact, he played with Arnold Palmer after mass sometimes. We were on our best behavior.

Andy's house seemed massive. Andy, too, had air-conditioning, but my parents sent us outside while the adults talked. Kay and I took off our shoes and quickly put them back on. Splinters from grass? In Minnesota if the grass was too dry it just turned brown. In Andy's yard the grass pricked our feet. I took Kay's hand and we set off to explore.

"Kay!"

"What, Shari?"

"Look!"

"Why would anyone have their washer and dryer outside?"

And that is what I remember best, besides meal-time prayers that went on for an insufferable length of time, long enough for hot food to cool and cool food to warm. Why did people live with their appliances outside?

Two days before the planned Disney excursion, I awoke once again with a fever.

"That's it, Audrey. I'm taking her to see a doctor. Since it's Saturday, I guess the emergency room at the hospital is the only option."

My dad consulted with his uncle. Mom and the other kids stayed behind to go to the ocean beach for the day. I rode with Dad to the Los Angeles County hospital. While my father waited in the immaculate corridor with the shining checkered floor, the doctor poked and prodded. One nurse brought in a needle and another nurse talked to me about Minnesota while blood was drawn.

They let me go sit with my dad while we waited for the results.

"When we go to Disneyland, Shari, you will see a pretend mountain called Matterhorn. It's not as pretty as the Rocky mountains that we'll see on the way home."

I rested my head on my dad's shoulder while he talked about his life in California to pass the time. The sun was so bright in California! Everything seemed to glow.

"You know, I was offered a job drawing for Mr. Disney just before I went back to Minnesota to work with Grandpa as a carpenter."

"Daddy, can you draw me a picture now? I want the one you had in the State Fair, the one of the wrinkly puppy."

"I will, honey. But right now we have to wait for the doctor."

I closed my eyes and napped while my dad turned to socializing with the nurses who walked past our outpost in the hall. Eventually I felt my dad's weight shift, and he picked me up when the doctor came down the hall with a clipboard.

"Mr. VanDusartz, the infection is still in her body. As the penicillin is not working as it should, I want to try another treatment."

"So, take her off the medicine?'

"No, keep giving her the penicillin. I want you to put Shari here on a yogurt diet. The cultures should destroy the staph infection. Yogurt, penicillin and water. A week should do the trick."

Yogurt? I had never heard of yogurt.My dad looked at the young doctor. "Where in the hell do I find yogurt?"

"Oh, all the chain groceries will have it. Just make sure you buy the plain yogurt. Don't add any fruit or other flavoring. Just plain yogurt. If she doesn't feel better in two days, we'll have to admit her to the hospital for treatment."

I ate yogurt and drank tap water until we returned home to Minnesota. My brother claims we went to Disneyland; I have no memories of the Matterhorn, Mickey or Donald Duck. I remember the taste of plain yogurt eaten from a waxy carton. I gagged on each bite. My mother sat and watched to make sure I kept every ounce down. As our family exited California to head back to Minnesota, we drove through Watts. The day after our departure, the riots broke out. The riot in my body quelled on a steady diet of plain yogurt and water.

The Accident

Rain fell that Memorial Day -- my family's plans for a lakeside outing drowned out by an Act of God. Only it didn't feel like an Act of God. It felt like Canada, jealous of the warmth in the United States, sent a blast to remind us that we, too, were above the equator and this was, after all, May, not June in Minnesota. Gray clouds blanketed the sky, the morning, and the rest of my eight-year-old world. The rain ruined my day: no burying toes and allowing the sun to bake them in the makeshift oven, no plunging fingers down deep beneath grains of sand released from the winter's chill in a reminder of the glory in the change from winter to spring, no timid attempts of attempting a plunge into frigid lake water. No, this day held no thunder to blast one into fury, no lightning to announce the importance of this day, just a steady, silent weeping, grieving of the cloud's moisture.

In an effort to salvage the day, my parents opt to take the family shopping at the Montgomery Ward's store in downtown St. Paul. While my father makes the decision to "keep the little ones busy" by taking the family on the outing, it is my mother who coordinates the departure of our large family from the three-bedroom ranch in the suburbs. Mother's slight build and fair coloring are echoed in my being; except that my mother is perfect and I am her greatest disappointment: the tomboy who plays football in the backyard instead of playing in the house with my dolls. How I wish I could find in my heart a reincarnation of the feminine qualities my Mother and older sister share.

Mother's hair, set in pin curls each night before bed, has not one strand out of place. Her immaculate clothes hang off her frame just as they did on the hangers in the department store. Mom walks down the main hall from the living room and interrupts a game of War taking place in the bedroom my younger sister Kay and I share. We are not allowed to play in the main living areas. As children we have been trained to keep our mother's domain as she prefers it: pristine.

Running from the bedroom to the living room, my younger sister, Kay, and I collide at the coat closet door just inside the front door. I yank open the door and push the heavy winter coats to one side. In the back of the closet, hanging on the hooks my father installed three feet from the floor are identical slickers. Mother purchased the green, blue, and red plaid hooded raincoats at the Super America gas station at the end of last summer. How long I had waited to finally graduate from a yellow slicker to one with a touch of fashion. The coats smell like the garage of the gas station, oily with a hint of fuel. The coat hangs down just below my hips, my light-blue pedal pushers providing additional coverage to just a couple of inches below my knees. White bobby socks and keds complete my outfit. Slipping the metal hook through the hole and fastening the latch, I see my sister, just one year younger, struggle with the clasps on her duplicate coat.

I glare at my sister, "Hey – you turn yours inside out – I get to wear the plaid today."

My younger sister Kay is not about to concede to my demands, "No. I don't like the green side. I like the pretty side out."

My shriek resonates down the hallway, "Mom – Kay's copying me again."

But my mother is not about to take my side this time, "Stop. Shari, Kay can wear whatever side out she wants, and if you keep pouting like that, your face will stay that way. Do you want your face frozen forever with that fat lip?"

In our house, raised voices demand an audience, and my older brother, Dave, chimes in, "Yeah, Shari, you'll look like this for confirmation." His protruding lower lip folds and unfolds behind Kay's back and I stop, horrified at the thought of causing a scene in church; calling attention to oneself is one of my mother's greatest sins.

Again Mom intervenes, "Dave, leave the girls alone. You're fourteen years old, for Pete's sake. Quit tormenting your little sisters. And where's your coat? We're leaving, Dad's warming up the car."

Dave's adolescent voice cracks with protest, "I don't want to go. Can't I just stay here? *The Three Stooges* is on at 1:00."

Sighing, my mother relents. "Okay, where's Cindi?"

My older sister pokes her face out of her room, "Stop in the Name of Love" rolls from her phonograph. I stand behind my mother and sneak a peak into Cindi's room. The needle on the 45 skips as Diana Ross predicts, "It's o -o -o -ver." Cindi must participate in the family outing.

With a huff, Cindi picks up the needle and replaces it on the holder, turns off the record player and closes the lid. At twelve, she is so sophisticated. Or at least as sophisticated as my father will allow in 1967. Her brown hair, the color of strong tea, is growing out and fits into a rubber band at the back of her neck. Dad no longer cuts her hair around a bowl at Grandpa's house like he does mine and Kay's hair. I touch my

blond bangs. I want a ponytail too. Magical things happen when you turn twelve: hair, clothes, records, posters, bras, and conversations with Mom. Dark blue jeans, a recent fashion for girls, pool on the floor covering Cindi's shoes. She isn't wearing keds. Mom bought her saddle-shoes, amused by the retro fashion from her own teenage years. Cindi wears the t-shirt she stole from Dave's drawer and tie-dyed in the washer with Rit dye.

With the martyr's voice only a preteen female can evoke, Cindi rebels against my mother, "That's not fair. Why do I have to go? Dave can go and watch the girls for you."

Unwilling to relinquish the dominant female role in the household, mother holds her ground, "Because Dave is fourteen and you are twelve. I'm not leaving you two alone. Now get your coat and get in the car. And Cindi, you sit in the middle this time and let the little girls have the window."

Stuck in the middle of the back seat, glossing her lips, Cindi mutters, "You babies. Just because you're little and cute, you always get your way, I'm going to leave you in the kitchens at Ward's while Mom and Dad look at tires. Some stranger is going to take you home!"

My father accelerates as he turns on Highway 61, the main drag in our suburb that will take us to the entrance of Interstate 94. The main artery will take us to downtown St. Paul and the wonders of Montgomery Ward.

Kay and Cindi inch across the red vinyl, crushing me against the door as we take a right onto the freeway entrance. My father holds the steering wheel with both hands as he starts down the cloverleaf and now the ride begins in earnest. I relax so that I push like a domino against my older sister, and together we slide across the bench seat, trapping

Kay against the other side of the car. Like the tilt-a-whirl at the county fair, we ride the back seat. On the straightaway of the freeway entrance, we all settle back to our original spots when the ride is over. I look out my window as my Dad looks over his shoulder to find a space to merge on the highway.

A blue Ford passes, and my father accelerates to the speed of traffic: 75 miles per hour. There is an opening, plenty of time to join the city-bound traffic. I mimic my father and just as we cross the invisible line delineating ramp and interstate, a white car accelerates, and jerks into the right-hand lane. I see the face of the woman in the front passenger seat gape at me as the car passes just inches from our car. My father jerks away as the back end of the white car swivels towards our front bumper. Over-correcting, our car leaves the paved road and straddles the shoulder. The white car accelerates and I watch the red taillights disappear into the rain. An arm on my back rips me from the view and I am staring at the hump on the floor. Kay is screaming in my exposed ear. I can't breathe, Cindi's weight presses me down, down, down, and leftover sand from winter's boots embeds my flattened cheek.

The ride becomes violent as the car slams into the streetlight on the passenger side of the car. The contest between car and steel is brief, and the pole sends our car in a whirling arc above the interstate. Cindi pushes down harder, willing her weight on Kay and me, squashing us flat. In ten seconds, the ride ends with a violent lurch, the car shuddering to a halt.

Suddenly the weight lessens and I sense movement. Cindi steps on my back as she leans into the front seat on the driver's side. She turns off the ignition. Then Cindi

scrambles up and over the bench and her feet disappear from view.

"Shari, watch Kay. Stay in the car, I'll be right back."

Kay still whimpers in my ear.

"Kay-Kay. It's okay. Get off me."

I squirm and finally Kay moves. We unfold our bodies and sit up on the backseat.

My mother's door is open and the front seat is empty. Dad, Mom and Cindi are gone. I lift the latch on the door in the back seat, but nothing happens. I try again, this time folding my legs back and kicking with both feet against the red vinyl. Protesting, the hinges move and the door yields 6 inches. I grab Kay's hand and I drag her with me out of the car; we fall in a heap into the ditch next to the shoulder of the highway. The mist is still falling. I see Cindi up the road talking to my Dad who is holding his head. Cars are stopping in the middle of the highway.

Where is Mom? I keep hold of Kay's hand, that's my job, taking care of my younger sister. We stand on the side of Interstate 94; our matching rubber coats the only protection from the environment. I see a man sprint up the on-ramp, and then Cindi is running away from Dad to the middle of the Interstate. I squeeze Kay's hand harder, waiting for someone to tell me what to do now.

"Sweetheart."

A door opens and a blond woman in dress pants and a raincoat emerges.

"Honey, come here."

Kay starts to move towards the woman whose soft voice waivers with each word. I grab Kay's arm and stop her. I raise my head and look the lady in the eye. Her eyes are

a bright blue and tears are forming in the corners.

I whisper, "We're not allowed to talk to strangers."

"It's okay. Why don't you and your sister come and wait in the car with me?"

I already broke one rule by leaving the car; there is no way I am going to let down my older sister again. "No. Mommy told me to never go with a stranger. We'll wait here for our sister. Cindi will tell us what to do."

Pulling her coat shut, the woman extends an arm towards the highway. "Is that your older sister over there?"

Cindi is squatting in the middle of the freeway, investigating a lump that someone covered with a blanket. A dark stain is growing around the spot.

"Cindi! Where's Mom?" My voice is carried by the wind in another direction and still Kay and I are left alone with the stranger who does not mind the smell of our wet rubber coats.

Cindi kneels down on the pavement and seems to be talking to the blanket. A crowd is gathering around her. Traffic into the city has stopped. I see my father stagger from the ditch. Now I can see the blood running down his face as he tries to make his way to Cindi and the blanket. The woman holds my hand tight, preventing me from joining the growing crowd in the middle of Interstate 94. Somehow she manages to hug both Kay and me while sirens grow louder.

In the back of the ambulance, after the medics had moved mother from her pool of blood on the Interstate, my mother regained her voice. Cindi was allowed to ride in

back and hold Mom's hand. Kay and I were shoved into the front bucket seat. Both of us fit, and I took the inside seat because the shotgun in the middle scared Kay. Dad was staying behind with the police to wait for a second ambulance. From the back of the ambulance my mother gave an order: Pray. All the way to St. Paul Ramsey County Hospital, we prayed the Hail Mary over and over again. We couldn't help but take up the rhythm of the siren, our words increasing and decreasing in volume as we wove wildly along the highway, the cars parting like the Red Sea in front of us.

At the hospital the nurses and doctors met the ambulance at the door and sprinted our mother to surgery. After a few minutes, the admitting nurse saw the three of us girls standing in the hallway, looking down the corridor that swallowed up our mother.

"Are any of you hurt?"

Miraculously, for the first time in my being, I did not cry. Kay did. Kay started to bawl and complained that her arm hurt. The nurse herded us into an examining room, set Kay on the bed while Cindi and I took seats in the plastic molded chairs. No one spoke. "A doctor will be in to see you soon." Directed. We sat and didn't say a word.

By the time Kay had been pronounced fine by an intern as all the doctors were frantically working on our mother in emergency surgery, a relative had been located. At the same time the three of us had been declared fine, not a scratch on any of us, my Uncle Steve parted the curtains and joined our cave.

We still did not cry. We barely knew Uncle Steve. He was my father's youngest brother. Sixteen years younger than my father, his world and my father's domestic world did not intersect often. Uncle Steve was taller than my father; he was well over six feet.

His physical appearance was the opposite of my father's. Uncle Steve had blue eyes, a light skin tone, and a full head of blond hair that framed his oblong face. Uncle Steve reminded Cindi of Tab Hunter from the old movies than ran on Channel 12 on rainy afternoons.

"Are you girls okay?"

We looked up at him. Okay, Yes. The doctors and nurses who had examined us said so.

"I'm going to take you over to Uncle Pete's."

"What about Mom and Dad?" Cindi found her voice.

"Your Mom is in surgery. Your dad is getting his head stitched up. You girls don't belong here. Uncle Pete is on his way to get Dave at home. Let's go."

"What about Mom? I want to talk to my Mom." I finally found my voice. All that blood. But she was talking in the ambulance, surely she could want to tell us to behave at Uncle Pete's. We had never stayed over at his house before.

"Shari, when a person has surgery the doctors put you to sleep. Your Mom can't talk to you right now. As soon as she can talk, I'm sure she will call you. Put on your coat now so we can go." Reluctantly we gathered our coats and followed Uncle Steve out to his car in the parking lot where the rain still fell on the cold, gray world.

Nightfall

The drive with our Uncle Steve from Ramsey County Hospital to my father's other brother, Pete's, house was silent. Being with my dad's relatives was a novelty. We were closer to mother's family. We only interacted with my dad's side on major holidays or celebrations. I really did not know my uncles outside of a social context.

When we arrived, my uncle and aunt greeted us at the door. They had five children, but the house was strangely silent. Mutely Kay, Cindi, and I stood in the front foyer while the adults had whispered conversations. The adults noticed our attempts to read their lips and my Aunt Pat shifted into gear and guided us all through an evening routine. Uncle Pete's house was a new design in 1967: the split level. While Kay and I bathed in the tub on the main floor, Dave was sent to take a shower on the lower level and Cindi was allowed into the master bath. The adults concluded their conversation while we were out of range. Sometime before my aunt arrived in the bath with my cousin's borrowed pajamas, my Uncle Steve left to return to the hospital.

We all congregated in pajamas on the main floor below the open kitchen in the family room. My mother would have been horrified to know that as the adults carried on frantic whispered conversations over the phone, my aunt let us watch "The Fugitive" with David Brennen on television. My cousins went to sleep on their schedule and the four of us huddled together on the couch as the man with one-arm pursued the fugitive on a car chase through a mysterious city somewhere on the West Coast.

It must have been a slow news day. After a commercial featuring the Marlboro Man, my family's white car filled the screen. I couldn't hear the words of the newscaster. I heard my Aunt's frantic shriek directed at my older brother. “Dave, turn off the television!”

My brother, who had not been in the car at the time of the accident, did not respond to the command.

Mesmerized, all four kids stared as the rain-slicked freeway and the twisted metal that just that morning had transported our family to a new life filled the screen.

Numb, I did not cry. In fact, no one reacted except the adults who ran down from the upper level, trying to prevent us from seeing the horrific scene that glowed in the family room. I don't think I felt anything, really. I just looked, yawned, and rested my head on the couch and went to sleep. I was so tired.

Interlude

The accident replays in my dreams on occasion. Time and time again I am eight years old and the family car veers out of control. My father and mother fly from the car's front seat into the blackness above the Interstate while my two sisters and I cower in the back of the car. Always in twilight, I emerge from the car to see my mother's shattered body in the middle of the road, blood seeping from her broken spine. The red river of her life flows freely, pooling at my feet. She speaks: "Pray." And I awake in convulsions, all the muscles in my own body in spasms.

After I stop quaking, I get up, go downstairs and get a glass of water. I remind myself. We survived. In the dark house, I sit on the couch alone, one-sided conversations running rampantly through my mind as I wait. Ten seconds changed my family. Ten seconds molded me into who I am. "If only" has been abandoned for years. In the dark I remember what I can. Memories.

Last week, a block from my driveway on my daily sojourn in the pre-dawn hours to work, I saw a yellow flash in my peripheral vision. Then I heard a thump. My heart beating frantically I pulled over to the side of the road. I heard a wounded animal's cry.

In the dark, a voice cried out. "Get back in your car! Please get back in your car!" A woman with two large dogs on a leash ran up to where I was parked.

I rolled down my window. "I'm sorry! He came from nowhere." I groped in my

purse. "Should I call someone?" I was screaming over the barking emitting from the end of the leashes she tried to hold on to in her hand.

"It's not your fault. He broke the leash." She struggled to control the two dogs still tethered to her arm.

In the review mirror I noted movement and then an animal running unsteadily down the sidewalk.

"Please go, you're agitating my animals."

I noted the cell phone in her hand and I left the scene with a sickening feeling. I went to work, shared my story, and went on with my day.

Ten seconds. The whole ordeal was over in ten seconds. I don't know if the dog lived or died. I just know I was in the wrong place at the wrong time going twenty miles an hour. It was just one unfortunate episode in life.

At one time an incident like this would have set off a deja vu to haunt both my conscious and subconscious. As I reflect on the why I wrote the piece of my family's tragedy, I look to my life. It simply needed to be written so I could move on.

Part II

Aftermath

My father believes that strength and faith will conquer all of life's trials. As a devote Catholic, he passes his faith down to his children, expecting us all to rise to the occasion. The accident took place on Memorial Day weekend, the official end of the school year. In the first few weeks following the accident, my father recovers from his head wound and copes with the reality of my mother's dire situation as the doctors try to save her life. The children are left at home. My father's mother, my grandmother Rose, takes over the domestic routine.

My father is gone most of the time and does not let on to his children how bleak the situation with mother is. Dad is at the hospital for each of the emergency surgeries on my mother's back as the medical professionals try to piece it back together again. Without telling his children, he meets with Father Fleming to plan Mom's funeral and picks out my mother's casket. Dave, Cindi, Kay and I are left out of all of the horrific realities. We have spent more time being nurtured by my mother's side of the family, so we struggle to adjust to our father's family taking over our care. At home my grandmother teaches us how to cook German meals. My mother's Scandinavian diet is abandoned for greasy meat and potatoes. We clean the house and master the domestic chores that fill a housewife's day.

My paternal grandmother, who raised only sons, transforms the three VanDusartz

girls into good little German fraulines. Cindi, Kay and I cook, clean, and prepare for the eventual return of a mother who cannot care for us in our daily lives. My brother, being a male, is exempt from the daily domestic regime. The children will be the caretakers, my mother the receiver of our attempts to resume the middle class existence that bled from her body in the middle of the highway. My brother will take on the male responsibilities when Dad is away working.

The domestic pattern headed by my paternal Grandmother Rose only stays in place a month. A second-generation German, my grandmother's parenting style is far-removed from the gentle nurturing of my maternal Norwegian relatives. Grandmother Rose has triumphed over tragedies in her own life through pure resolve, and by God, so will her son's children. She firmly believes physical hard work will triumph over the challenges God gives you.

In Rose's defense, my mother jaded us with her opinion of my grandmother. Rose was as brash as my mother was timid. Tall, 5'6" to my mother's 4'11"; fashion conscious due to her long career as the make-up clerk at a major department store, and brash in her speech, my grandmother inspired my bookish, easily pliable mother to hide from the onslaught that took place whenever my grandmother arrived. Rose demanded attention with just her presence. Plus, what grandmother wore tapered skirts that came only to the knee, form fitting blouses that enhanced her curvy torso and high heels during the day?

Rose did not believe in the house dresses and homemade aprons that graced my maternal relatives' closets. Not only that, but she also dyed her hair, wore makeup along with matching jewelry she made herself from paste. My mother did not have a high

opinion of Rose, and my mother's children were loyal; Mom couldn't stand up for herself, so we made things difficult as we thought our mother would have wanted.

Grandma was not used to four loud, rambunctious kids during the day. As it was summer vacation, we were in and out of the house. Doors slammed, fights ensued, pleas for permission to go to the lake were now directed at Grandma. At first Grandma tried to reprise her mother role with us. But we had a mother; we knew that. We just hadn't seen her since the accident. Grandma was desperate to keep us under control and tried to show us who was boss.

"Grandma, can I make Kool-Aid?"

I was thirsty and Dad had not yet gone to the dairy to refresh our milk supply Grandma didn't drive, so we had to make do. There were only four choices for beverages left in the house: water, tea, coffee, and Kool-Aid.

"Okay, I think it's about time you learned how to make it yourself. Here's the pitcher. Can you read the directions on the back of the package?"

"Grandma! I was in the top reading group!" I was offended that she thought I couldn't read. I was not a baby.

Slowly I sounded out the letters. Empty the package into a pitcher. Carefully I ripped the top off my chosen flavor. Since I was making the beverage, I was finally allowed to pick the flavor. I had chosen Lime-aid.

I read further, mouthing the words silently so Grandma would see that I was big enough to do this on my own.

Mimicking my mother's actions, I lifted the heavy sugar container from the lower

cupboard to the kitchen table. The kitchen counter top was too high. I couldn't see.

I used the step-stool in order to retrieve the one-cup measuring cup.

"No. Shari. That's too much sugar."

Grandma reached up and took down the ½ cup measure.

"But Grandma, the directions say one cup!"

I knew I had read the package instructions right.

"The last thing I need is for you kids to fill up on sugar. You have enough energy as it is. Use the cup I gave you."

My first batch of Lime Kool-Aid was too tangy. The color was wrong. It was the green of the sky after thunderstorms, not the darker green of algae washed to the lake shore. The drink did not quench my thirst. The flavor was missing. Yet I didn't dare add more sugar.

For some strange reason, I have been appointed the official laundress, and I learn how to sort, wash, dry, and iron after school each day. Standing on my mother's kitchen step stool, my grandmother trains me for a life of domestic servitude. Grandmother survived the Depression by laundering other people's clothes in Chicago, and clearly, she honestly believes this is my calling.

"Shari, you always start with the smaller parts of the shirt: see the arms, the collar, then the sides. Last you iron the back. Just a little starch to make the fabric look new."

Following my Grandmother's directions, I wrestle the white dress shirt that matches my height onto the ironing board. Okay, ready. I look up at my Grandmother

ready for the next lesson.

"Spit on your finger, and put it on the iron. Hear the sizzle? That means the iron is ready. Now you try." Grandmother steps back to supervise.

I reposition the shirt on the ironing board and lick my finger, hesitate a few seconds, and thump my forefinger against the widest part of the iron. Jeez! Quickly I pull my hand back, tottering on the stool. That's hot. I pop the finger with the erupting blister into my mouth to cool down my flesh.

"Don't hold your finger on the iron, just touch the iron lightly. Now try again."

I am panicked. Grandma means business, and there is no way to avoid my assigned task. I am not going to put my finger on the iron again. I tilt my head and think. There's got to be another way besides burning a different finger.

"Come on! We still have the rest of the basket to iron."

I gulp and take my finger out of my mouth. Quickly I put my finger back into my mouth and wait while saliva collects. When I am sure that I have collected enough liquid to coat the erupting blister, I pull out my finger and shake it gently to drip my saliva on the hot metal plate without touching the offending metal again. My grandmother, hearing the sizzle, nods her head and I push the iron with all my might across the wrinkled dress shirt. The folds of white fabric unfurl and I am left with a white tapestry, the bleach fumes rising and making my head light.

"Quickly, Shari, Quickly! You don't want to scorch the shirt."

I concentrate, the movement of the iron matching the throbbing in my finger and under my grandmother's direction, I complete my task.

That night when my dad returns from the hospital, I take his hand and lead him down the short hallway to his bedroom. I open the sliding closet door that holds his "good" clothes. The majority of space is taken up with my mother's dresses, both her loose fitting house dresses that button-up in front and have large pockets to hold all of the items a mother picks up during the course of a day's cleaning, and her three church dresses. My father's side of the closet holds his two suits; one brown and one black worn alternate Sundays to church. The black suit is also worn to funerals and weddings. I ironed his white dress shirt and proudly show him my accomplishments for the day. He stares down at me, "You ironed this today, Shari?"

"Yes Daddy, Grandma showed me how. I used starch and water from the seven-up bottle just like Mom." I am so proud of mastering the seven-up sprinkling system of ironing. An old green seven-up bottle was relegated to laundry duty once empty. After thoroughly washing out the sticky, sweet residue, you filled the bottle with tap water. A silver lid fit the top perfectly: little holes like a watering can insured that the water would be distributed evenly on the fabric. When you ironed, a cloud of stream would rise, making the fabric soft after having dried on the clothes line in the back yard. Only in the depths of winter did anyone use the clothes dryer. Laundry dried outside on sunny days. Clothes were left stiff and wrinkled. You need the steam to bring the fabric back to life.

"What happened to your finger, little girl?" My dad looks at my right index finger wrapped in cotton gauze and held in place with the white medical tape.

"Oh, I burnt it testing the iron. Grandma put on A&D ointment and wrapped it up for me. It only hurts now when I do this." I put my arm down to my side for a brief

demonstration. Quickly I bring it back up higher so that my finger does not face a downward direction. I have mastered the art this afternoon of keeping my finger from throbbing too hard.

"Thank you, honey. I'll let your Mom know what a great help you are." My dad looks off at some distant point out his bedroom window that overlooks our street and rubs his calloused hands over his bald pate. "You better get ready for bed now."

Just as fast as my grandmother appeared in our daily lives, she left. My older brother Dave said something to Grandma that made her mad. After his exit line, Dave took off running. My Grandmother, wearing three inch heels, followed out the side door. I remember standing in the front yard with Cindi and Kay, watching my brother race past the neighbor's house three doors down, my grandmother sprinting after him, dangerously close to closing the gap.

My neighbors in our track 1950s suburban development-- accountants, car salesmen, teachers-- a blend of white and blue collar workers living out the post WWII dream -- were not accustomed to such mid-day dramas. That evening my father met with the neighbor who volunteered to discuss the situation. An agreement ensued. The neighbors would keep an eye out for the kids during the day while my Dad worked and kept vigil at the hospital. My older brother Dave, age fourteen, would be left in charge until Aunt Joyce arrived from Oregon. Then we would look for a new solution.

Adaptation

Aunt Joyce and my cousins took the train from Oregon to Minnesota to come and stay just one month after the car accident. I barely knew my Aunt Joyce. The last time I had seen her, I was just nineteen months old and ate her cigarette butts out of the ashtrays. Thankfully I didn't remember the experience, although my father and aunt laughed at the memory one evening over a beer after their hospital visit.

While Joyce and my dad sat whispering at the kitchen table, the kids turned down the television in the living room to listen. With Joyce in town, we were able to feel a sense of adventure. Joyce understood about illness. She was a nurse. She did not discuss my mother's condition in the evenings. Instead, family stories were repeated just within earshot of the eavesdroppers in the next room.

Dad and Joyce reminisced about family. A frequent topic was about the last time she had visited Minnesota with her children. My younger sister Kay and my cousin Ron, at three months old, had screamed their lungs out at each other. Needless to say, the appearance of Aunt Joyce with her four children in tow was a novelty.

With Grandma Rose out of the picture, Dad and Joyce decided to bring all the kids to the hospital to wait while they had a short visit with Mom the first week Joyce was in town. Dave would watch us in the waiting room while the adults discussed Mom's next surgery. It would not be a long discussion and surely we could behave ourselves for an hour or so.

Dad left Dave with money in case we got hungry. The directions to the hospital cafeteria were simple. From the intensive care waiting room, we were to take the elevator down to the basement level. There were lines on the floor that led the way into the eating area. Dad said to just follow the yellow line, and our reward would be a cafeteria filled with pop and vending machines that would dispense candy to occupy our time until the consultation was complete – an hour at the most.

Poor Dave. He had almost two minutes of cooperation from the seven children he was trying to herd until we were bored and ready for adventure. I wasn't particularly hungry or thirsty, but I was curious about the building where my mother lived.

"Okay, okay. We'll go down to the cafeteria. You guys have to be good or they'll kick us out."

I shuddered. If they kicked us out of the hospital, where would we go? Ramsey County Hospital was not in a good area of town. It was enclosed by the Interstate 35 on one side and industrial buildings on the other. We would have to stand outside in the parking lot in shame if we misbehaved.

It was an orderly group that descended to the basement. We followed two by two behind Dave. He was on a mission, and the sooner he could move us to our destination, the sooner he could relax in the vinyl chairs in the bright cafeteria.

From the intensive care elevators, the yellow line led the way past the kitchen. I gasped and prodded Kay.

"Look at the size of those bowls!" I paused outside of the open passageway on the right side of the hall. Huge mixing bowls, as large as Kay stood gleaming in the

fluorescent lighting. They looked like Mom's mixing bowls at home, but were so huge!

"Come on Shari!" Dave had noticed the lag in the procession. "That's just the kitchen."

"But look at the bowls!"

"I know. They make a lot of food here. Now get moving."

I thought of my mother's mixing bowls at home and wondered if the hospital made crumb cake too. I missed my mother's cooking.

Dave distributed the money Dad had left with him. We all studied the vending machines lining the cafeteria wall. Nurses and doctors in white uniforms went through a food line at the other end of the huge room. We kept close, scared that if we wandered, someone would notice a group of eight unattended children and send us out of the only room with a window. Dave commandeered a table near the huge plate glass window that overlooked a small garden. Quietly we consumed our pop and candy bars, watching the cars come and go from the distant parking lot. We pretended not to notice as white legs passed us by. Once in a while there would be a hesitation, but no adult engaged us in conversation.

Dave looked up at the clock that hung on the wall near entrance to the cafeteria. "Okay, finish up. We have to meet Dad in ten minutes."

We retraced our steps to the bank of elevators. It must have been all of that sugar. As the doors closed, my cousin Steve reached over and ran his finger down the entire bank of buttons. Our ride would be stopping at every floor from the basement up to the seventh floor.

"Damn it Steve." Dave elbowed him to the back of the car.

Slowly we made our way up to where we were to meet our parents.

Dave was agitated. Kay and I slid to the back of the car. Every time the door opened, a curious adult peered into our space. No one joined us in our small upward bound car.

Somehow Steve managed to make his way back up to the control panel between the sixth and seventh floors.

"Hey, Dave!"

My older brother had been intently watching the lights above the sliding doors, anxious to unload all of his charges to the adults. Dave looked over at Steve.

"What happens when you do this?" Steve pushed the open door button.

The car lurched to a complete stop between floors. The doors remained closed. Everyone grabbed at the rails that lined the small interior to stay upright.

"God damn. Steve." Dave yelled, his voice echoing in the small enclosure.

I started to cry. "I want Daddy."

"Hang on Shari, I'll get you out of here."

Dave manhandled Steve to the back of the car. "Don't you dare move." Dave hit the door closed button, thinking maybe that would reverse the first command. We all waited but nothing happened.

"Dave, there's a telephone for emergencies." Cindi came forward and started to open the little door with a phone receiver below the buttons.

"No. Not yet. Dad is going to kill us."

Dave tried pushing the button for the seventh floor. The elevator lurched upward and stopped. He tried the down button. Nothing. The up button – again nothing. I could feel tears forming in my eyes. We were going to be stuck in this elevator forever.

Dave jabbed at the open door button, repeatedly pushing the glowing disk.

Slowly the doors slid open.

A floor appeared at my eye level. Dave leaned his head and looked up and down the hall.

"Okay. No one's looking – quick. Jump out." The bigger kids scrambled as they pulled themselves up to floor level. Dave lifted the four younger ones up to the hallway. "Go!" Dave whispered, not wanting to attract attention.

Dave climbed out and reached over to the control button on the wall. He selected the down button. We held our breath. Slowly the doors closed. Our tomb descended from view.

Giggling, we made our way back to the waiting room.

"Don't tell Dad." We grinned back at Dave. This was one secret we all agreed should not be shared with the adults.

I don't think anyone ever told. Yet, for some reason, Dad and Joyce never did bring us all back to the hospital.

The adults continued to spend long hours in the intensive care ward of Ramsey County Hospital in St. Paul. All eight children were left to their own devices at our home in White Bear Lake to fend for themselves. Four boys, four girls; ranging from the oldest, my brother, Dave age 15 to my cousin Glen, the baby at six.

Dave was in charge of running the house while the adults dealt with more pressing matters. The first few days were fairly calm. Kay and I soon discovered that Glen fit into Kay's clothes. Oh Boy. For three days we dressed Glen and walked him around the neighborhood introducing him as our girl cousin. My Dad and Aunt Joyce found out we had to find new ways to entertain ourselves during the day and were not amused. A chore list seemed the answer.

Dave told my cousin Steven to hang up the clothes on the clothesline. At eleven, Steve found this task beneath him. A house with eight children residing in it produces mammoth amounts of clothes to be washed and hung out to dry.

Dave glared at Steve. "You hang up clothes until you run out of clothespins!"

Kay and I smirked. There was no way Steve would ever get out of this one. Our family had an entire bucket of clothespins. Enough to hang up the entire neighborhood's weekly laundry!

Kay, Ron, Glen and I asked Dave if we could please, please watch television.

Dave crossed his arms in an imitation of adult consternation. "Okay, but you can only watch the education channel."

Dave went into the kitchen to start lunch. Looking out through the sheer yellow curtains over the sink, he checked Steve's progress in the back yard. "God damn it! What do you think you're doing?"

We rushed from the living room into the galley kitchen to see the afternoon's diversion. Steve waved from the middle of the backyard where the iron poles stretched across, holding taut white lines that were beyond my reach. He had hung up exactly five

shirts, with twenty clothespins holding each of the shirts securely to the rope.

Dave exploded and ran out the side door. In amazement Kay, Ron, Glen and I watched as my brother captured my cousin. He held Steve with one hand and untied one of the six lines with the other and dragged both in the house. Grabbing one of the metal kitchen chairs covered in yellow vinyl, he shoved his quarry down the hall into the bathroom. He lifted the chair into the tub and put Steve on the chair. Around and around went the rope until Steve was securely mummified with only his head unbound. Then Dave turned on the shower.

Steve laughed. "Hey – I was hot from being outside anyway."

Aunt Joyce left when my Mom stabilized. Dad continued to work full-time during the day and go to the hospital after dinner.

At home we took care of ourselves. We did fine for the most part. Yet there were incidents. One evening Dave tried to fix the broken swing-set in the backyard for Kay and me. He chopped off the tip of his finger as he tried to manipulate the iron cross-bar into the frame. One of the neighbors took him to the emergency room. Later that night, a neighbor boy came to the back door. He had found Dave's missing joint. Did we want it? I looked at the fingertip wrapped in a Kleenex. Too late.

Homecoming

It wasn't until the fall that Mom was able to come home for visits. She would be given a day pass from the hospital. With my emaciated mother down to 90 pounds, my carpenter father could easily lift her from the car and carry her into the house. There she would sit in her new wheel-chair as we gathered around her. Those visits were celebrations. Mom in the living room, food prepared in the kitchen by her sister Wilma. It was almost like having her home again. But she could not sleep in her old double bed she had shared with dad. Obviously, something had to be done before Moma came home to stay. The ladies in the neighborhood took up the task.

Daddy built a ramp that allowed wheelchair access into the front door. He built the ramp from leftover plywood, painted it white to match the shutters on our forest green, three bedroom track house. When you entered through the front door, there was a closet to the left, a bookshelf with planter to the right. The floor plan was circular. One could enter the kitchen/dining area from one end of the living room, or move down the hallway containing the three bedrooms and the bath from the left. A small bedroom connected the galley kitchen and the hallway.

At the time of the accident, Dave resided in the smallest bedroom, and the three girls shared the largest bedroom in the southwest corner of the house. My parents' room was medium-sized with a dresser and a double bed. Before Mom came home to stay, rooms needed to be reallocated.

Dad built a bedroom for David in the unfinished basement. Dad used dark paneling to construct Dave's personal cave. Cindi finally had her own room. She took over the small connecting room with two doors. Kay and I moved into the room with Mom and Dad's double bed, and Mom and Dad took over the largest room with a new hospital bed for Mom and a single bed for dad.

The neighborhood ladies decorated the room for my parents. The carpet was pulled up and the original wood floor glistened in the afternoon sun. The pink walls of young girls were covered over with a sterile white. A hospital bed fit into the southeast corner. It moved up and down smoothly like a carnival ride. It came complete with a trapeze bar to aid my mother in moving from bed to chair. There was a smaller dresser, functioning as a nightstand. A commode was ordered and folded flat against the wall to the left of the door across the room. A kitchen cabinet was installed above the commode to hold all of the medical supplies for my mother.

There was her pharmacy of drugs along with the equipment needed to care for a paraplegic: catheters, and bedsore creams. But mainly the space held pain killers. The doctors could not control mother's pain. Finally, Dad took over the trundle bed that used to belong to Kay and me. The narrow bed, with the second bed permanently stored underneath, took residence underneath the high rectangular window on the southwest side of the room.

Dad had the living room carpeted to accommodate the wheelchair. We were the only house that boasted an entire room with indoor/outdoor carpeting. While our friends and neighbors redecorated their homes with the long shag carpeting featured in *Better*

Homes and Gardens, our floors were covered in the short, coarse weave that allowed the wheels of Mom's chair to glide easily from one end of the house to another. Kay and I quickly learned that care was needed with the floor. Our knees sported carpet burns from contact with the unforgiving surface. The house was ready for my Mom to return home.

Our dog Peppi was still a puppy at the time of the accident. He was a cowardly dog; we amused ourselves with his best parlor trick. If someone knocked on the door, Peppi tore down the hallway, hid underneath Cindi's bed, and barked timidly until someone told him to be quiet. He was a cocker spaniel mix, calf high with long, shiny black fur. Only his chest was a snowy white. Not even the neighborhood cats were intimidated by Peppi. His passive demeanor stemmed from a previous car accident.

Peppi was David's dog. The first month of ownership, my Dad and Dave took Peppi to the vet. There are car dogs and non-car dogs. Peppi hated the car. In the pre-airconditiong days of 1966, my father was driving at a nice 45 mile an hour clip down County Road E with windows opened in back for ventilation. Peppi was a small bundle of black and white fur frantically barking in the back seat. Suddenly, Dave noticed the lack of the staccato from the rear in the car.

Dave looked back and through the rear window watched as his new puppy bounced off the highway, onto the gravel shoulder and landed in the ditch.

"Dad! Stop!"

Dad sighed and slowed the car, pulling over onto the gravel shoulder. Dave jumped out of the car and ran the thirty feet back to where his puppy lie in the ditch.

"He's still alive, Dad."

"Let me see Dave."

Peppi's right hind leg was mutilated from the projection out the open back window. Dave and Dad took him to the vet where in addition to his shots, he also received a plaster cast on his leg that ran from the area above his foot to under the hip joint. By the time he returned home two days later, my mother had borrowed an old wooden playpen for the dog. Kay and I took turns feeding him by hand through the beaded bars. His puppy spirit broken by the trip out the window, Peppi cowered and spent most of his time docile in the house, going outside on his chain to relieve himself twice a day, always returning to his place hiding under the bed.

A strange transformation took place the day Mom came home from the hospital for her first visit after the accident. Peppi appointed himself her personal guard dog. Taking his position beside the right wheel of the wheelchair, Peppi stood as a palace guard dog, as my mother, the queen, sat on her royal throne. Only two males were allowed in the house: my father and my brother. All other males were met before entering by a ferocious black bundle of fur leaping window high with barred teeth forbidding entrance through the door. The small dog intimidated men of considerable girth, snarling and protecting mother in the living room.

Peppi tolerated female visitors, although barely. He seemed to understand that it was the visiting women my mother needed. There were my aunts who came to gossip. The neighborhood women at first stopped by for coffee. There were women hired to take car of my mother's physical needs while the rest of the family was at work and school. Finally, most importantly, there were the visiting home nurses who came once a week to

give mother her bath and check on the bedsores that plagued her.

Mother, never a dog lover, came to love her self-appointed protector. Peppi only left mother's side to go outside. He sat next to her in the living room, supervised all of the medical care administrated in the back bedroom mother shared with Dad, and kept vigil whenever the visiting nurse shut the door for the private care my mother needed.

Day Help

Mom could not be left alone during the day. Our family had been prominent in the St. Pious Catholic parish. My father ushered and my mother, a Catholic convert, belonged to the Rosary Guild and was active in all of the different groups that provided food for funerals, helped in missionary efforts and generally participated in all church events. The church ladies wanted to help one of their own.

The first woman from the church to come and stay with Mom during the day was Mrs. Wolfe. A recently retired parochial teacher, as a good Christian Mrs. Wolfe came forward and took the position as caretaker for my mother and the children while my father worked full-time and all the scab jobs he could in order to keep the family together. Mrs. Wolfe arrived every morning dressed as she had for the classroom. The formal wear did nothing to intimidate us kids who had spent the last six months raising ourselves. We had managed just fine without adult supervision. Did she really think that after a day with the nuns who ruled with a wooden pointer, that we would be intimidated by glaring looks? She had no authority in our house.

Mrs. Wolfe was a stanch Catholic and she struggled with my mother's daily regime. There were the multiple medications housed in the cupboard in the back bedroom with the schedule taped to the left door. There was the commode used twice daily and the clean-up afterward. In addition, my mother's diabetes was now another factor. A special diet and insulin were necessary. The Darvon prescribed for the pain that never quite went

away entitled my mother to two naps a day. My mother was humiliated with the personal care she needed being administrated by her peer from the Ladies of Perpetual Good Deeds at church. Cleaning out bedsores and applying the stringent antiseptic did not bode well for either woman.

In keeping with her Catholic beliefs, Mrs. Wolfe shared her opinions that God only did things for a reason. There was some cosmic balance played out in my mother's situation. The additional burden of a continual dialog on how mother was being punished by God for some wrong she had committed drove my mother's spirit downward.

The children reacted and Mrs. Wolfe only kept her position as caretaker for one month. I don't really know what we did to her, but soon she was gone and Lucille came.

Lucille was Mexican. She had two little boys and a husband who traveled between Minnesota and Mexico. He purchased goods at bargain prices from Mexico and sold them for a profit in the cities. Lucille was a registered nurse, and did not flinch at my mother's needs, she took the commode and bedsores in stride. Lucille stayed for a year until one day her husband decided he no longer wanted to live in the Minnesota cold and moved the family back to Mexico.

Lucille was a kind soul. In third grade, school dismissed early during a blizzard. Snowdrifts towered above my head, dwarfing me as I walked through the semi-slush in the road. I stopped at my friend Shannon's house, but her mother had a new baby and refused me sanctuary from the storm. I trudged the mile and a half home alone; pitching my bundled body forward against the howling wind pelting me with frozen buckshot,

tears freezing to my face, flexing my fingers to stop the constant burning.

I walked in the middle of the roads, through the tunnel of snow that dwarfed me on either side of the street. The street signs were no longer visible. If I stopped and squinted, I could just make out the two story houses along my route. I only checked my bearings periodically. It was hard to start moving again. I was so tired. I just wanted to sit in a snow bank and wait for a car to pick me up. But there were no cars. My ears burned. I clapped my mittens over my cap and sang the song Sister Teresa taught us that morning. "*Lord, teach us to pray. It's been a long and cold December kind of day.*"

I was glad no one came by. My voice wasn't very good, but the words were loud in my head. I repeated the only lines I had memorized that morning: the chorus. I sang the words over and over until finally I saw the house three doors from my home. Standing on a hill, the house was a beacon of hope. Tears formed as I ran the last few yards. I waded up my driveway and collapsed on the kitchen floor.

Mom and Lucille were frantic.

"Where have you been?"

"Shannon and I walked. Her Mom said I couldn't come in because of the baby."

"Oh my god." Mom rarely swore and I started to cry. Did I do something wrong?

Once in the house, my ears started to tingle. I started to rub my ice-cold hands on the unbending cartilage. Lucille noticed the frostbite and took action. Lucille warmed her hands on her blouse and then cupped my head gently in her hands, slowly bringing back the feeling.

Mom sat in her wheelchair, cursing my friend's mother as Lucille comforted me,

telling me that next time, I should take the bus home.

I wanted to take a hot bath to return to normal, but Lucille made me take a lukewarm bath.

Just as suddenly as Lucille entered our lives, she exited.

My father ran an ad in the St. Paul dispatch and found Norma. Norma was a young woman with a checkered history. She grew up on a farm in Wisconsin. The father of her little boy, Kim, was in prison in Minnesota, so she had relocated in order to visit him regularly. Without a car, the package deal was that she could bring three-year-old son, Kim, with her to work. She took the bus between her home in the Minneapolis projects and our suburban home. Norma smoked hand rolled cigarettes and had a unique way of cleaning. She would start at one end of the house and simply move the misplaced items along the corridor until a huge pile accumulated in the living room, my mother's domain. This drove my mother crazy. Mother had been a pristine housekeeper; the chaos Norma created was almost too much for her to bear.

Just as mother had almost succeeded in convincing my father to run another ad, Norma asked if it would be okay to make bread for the family. Out came the large turnkey roasting pan. Yeast, flour, real butter and milk were lovingly combined and even the smell of stale cigarettes was overpowered by the rising dough in the kitchen. It was heavenly. Then, Norma floured the entire wooden kitchen table and began the assembly of the week's baked goods. She took a chunk of the pale beige mass and rolled it paper thin on the table. She melted butter and sugar in a small pan on the electric stove.

Carefully she added just enough cinnamon to flavor the syrup. With a pastry brush, she painted the rectangular dough. She would roll the dough evenly and carefully cut the ensuing log with white thread into one-inch portions. On a buttered cookie sheet, the disks transformed into gooey rising rolls. Covering the sheet with a white flour sack dish towel to rise on the preheating stove, Norma would repeat the process, this time with brown sugar and vanilla to create a caramel glaze. The remaining dough produced two loafs of white bread.

Every Thursday Norma baked bread for our family. Every Thursday my mother forgave the running list of why Norma should no longer be employed by our family. The smell of baking bread worked as a tranquilizer for my mother. Finally, there was a feeling of home. Norma belonged.

Intact

After the accident my father kept the family together at all costs. With the astronomical hospital bills, it was necessary for our family to go on public aid. The government decided the most efficient way to pay for my mother's care was for my father to divorce my mother. She would be made a ward of the state and they could move her to a nursing home. My father refused. Minnesota Human Services came in and threatened to take the children away to foster homes. My father prevailed. Our family remained intact. The repercussion was financially devastating. There were home visits from nurses, food stamps for groceries, and periodic home checks to make sure our family still deserved the government's money.

I wanted a new Schwinn bike. I knew that my family could never afford such a luxury, so I saved all the money given to me for my first communion and confirmation. My dad took me to the Schwinn bike shop and I picked out a royal blue, two speed and paid for it with my money. The next week there was a surprise home visit from social services. I had to explain to the social worker that I had, indeed, paid for the bike on my own. My father had not contributed a dime. She grudgingly took the receipt and noted it on her case notes.

There simply was not enough money. The children wore uniforms to school, and each of us had two sets of play clothes and two Sunday outfits. The LaRue family, with six children made clothing contributions on a regular basis. However, only Kay and I

benefited from the large bag of hand-me-downs. Dave and Cindi both went to work to supplement the family's income. As long as their money only paid for their things, we still qualified for government assistance.

Food. There was never enough food. My mother ate mainly boiled food due to her diabetes. By the time I was nine, poached eggs were one of my specialties. Her other favorite meal was boil-in-the bag Chicken-a-la-King. Those I could manage. But the family had to be fed. We all took turns fixing dinner for the family.

One evening the menu was boiled cabbage. In the refrigerator there were two heads of green. Dave dutifully boiled water in the heavy Dutch oven on top of the stove. After a few minutes it was obvious that he had boiled the wrong head of green leafs. The boiled lettuce had no smell. It simply wilted into great blobs tinged with a little color. As we sat at the kitchen table, my father served the mess. Looking at the glop on my plate, I knew. We had to eat this. There were no other options. Family law dictated that no one left the table until their plate was clean. I sat at the table for over two hours, choking down the slime in small measures.

As bad as eating boiled lettuce proved to be, one meal ranked higher on the grotesque scale. My Father brought home cow's tongue for dinner. The tongue took over the place of liver and onions as the most despised family meal. Again the Dutch oven was used to boil our dinner. Dad put the poached meat on the serving platter and sliced away. Reluctantly we passed our plates to be served. Lots of ketchup buried the offending organ. This time we managed to leave the table in only an hour.

After Dave and Cindi started working outside the home, I took over in the kitchen,

preparing family dinners. The one advantage of being so young when I started cooking was that I did not know anything was amiss. I thought everyone came home from school, did their homework, and made dinner. It was simply one of my chores. I learned to make inexpensive meals.

When I was in fifth grade, we were taught about the four food groups. As the stove was now my domain, I pasted the graphic above my work area. The only precooked items in the house were my mother's frozen boil-in-a-bag meals. I cooked from scratch, with cheap cuts of meat. I cooked spaghetti, chili, stew, and meatloaf. One pound of hamburger equaled one meal for six. I started to read cookbooks and the recipes in the magazines that my father purchased for Mom at the grocery store. *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Redbook* would on occasion publish family recipes for those on a budget. Standing on the step-stool in the kitchen, I carefully followed the magazine's directions and cooked for my family.

Freak show

My mother was embarrassed by her twitching legs. My brother Dave saved up and bought her a brightly colored beach towel which fit her body perfectly from the waist and cascaded down over her lap, thighs and calf, ending above her shoes. The towel's width was perfect, there was no excess material to tuck into the sides. I remember the towel as being blue, green, and yellows in a vibrant sixties acid pattern. At first my mother was rather hesitant to wear the towel in public. It was loud for her Jackie-esque personality, but one night a musician at a restaurant asked my mother if he could purchase the towel due to its unique appeal. From then on she was okay wearing the towel in public.

The main issue with going out in public was the stares. Overnight the family had become a freak show. Unabashed, people would glare at my mother and all of us surrounding her, a mini-parade for their entertainment. The toll on my mother was great. She did not like to be the center of attention. Status quo was gone, but to be the object of scrutiny was more then she could bear. Ventures from the house become rare.

The kids learned to stay behind mother's chair. Dad would walk push Mother's chair, carrying on a conversation. The girls became professional at returning unblinking gazes upon any one who dared to gawk. We would meet the eyes of those rude enough to gawk at mother and analyze them with rock-like facial features and unblinking eyes – the Mount Rushmore of children looking out upon those crude enough to think this was a scenic view.

One of the first ventures out for our revived family was to a department store. After placing my mother in her wheelchair, we approached the entrance. The manager met the family in the parking lot before we managed to get into the store.

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to use the back entrance."

His pronouncement left the family speechless. What! We were not allowed to go through the front door?

"You can maneuver the chair through the loading area in the back. Follow me."

Numb, we fell into line behind the man. This was a new experience, and Kay and I took in the sights as we made our way around the building. In the back there were crates, and dumpsters and grimy men throwing large boxes like blocks into a dim cave. A semi-truck was unloading its wares onto the loading dock. A small door was overshadowed by the huge, garage-like entrance. The manager took out his key and unlocked the smaller door. One-by-one we filed in. We were dwarfed by the towering cartons of merchandise. Sounding out the letters, I tried to figure out the contents as we briskly marched past tunnels of boxes. I looked up at the metal rafters. I felt like we were in a cave. Mother's chair glided across the smooth cement surface, her face unmoving, eyes staring down at her folded hands in her lap. My father's eyes glowed; the tension was beginning to show itself in the rigidity of his stance. Taking the lead from our parents, we followed silently.

"Please be careful not to block any of the aisles. There are a lot of customers today. Have the customer service desk page me when you are ready to leave. I'll escort you out."

With that statement, the manager fled our tour group.

"Don, get me out of this store!" My mother hissed.

"No, Audrey, we have every right to be here. There just wasn't room to get the chair in through the front. There's probably a big display blocking the aisle. The manager just wanted to make sure we were able to get in safely."

"Daddy, I need new shoes."

Both of my parents looked over at me. Their children stood before them in a Von-trap line. We needed clothes, and the family was in the store. Sighing, my mother swallowed and nodded, contemplating the next move.

"I have the list. Let's go to Juniors first for Cindi's clothes and then we can look at shoes for Shari and Kay. Don, why don't you and Dave head over to the men's department and come back for us when you are finished. Just be quick."

My father and brother turned and left for their mission. Cindi took over the commandeering of my mother's chair and we strove towards the Junior department. Other shoppers moved, giving a wide berth to our procession. Mothers grabbed their children by the hand and in stage whispers gave instructions, "don't stare." The rest of the whispered conversations took on a sickening familiarity: just look at that poor woman and her children. Now weren't they grateful that God had been so good to them? That's what happened to families God hadn't blessed as much as their own. Take pity and tonight as they said their prayers they should remember the crippled woman in the wheelchair and her daughters dressed in rags.

All the while, my mother winced and firmly pressed her thin lips into an

unmovable line. Her hands clasped the arms of her chair so tightly her knuckles turned white. Her legs twitched beneath her heavy beach towel, the movement so slight that only those of us who knew that suppressed emotions sent out uncontrollable signals to her wasted limbs could detect the anger brewing in Mom. Cindi leaned over and whispered in Mother's ear.

"Don't worry, Mom."

I looked down at my clothes, I wasn't wearing rags. Mrs. LaRue had sent over a big bag of clothes just last week. Why, these were almost new. I wore rust pedal pushers and a vibrant lime green shirt. I loved the way the colors looked on me. Since I wore the standard green and white plaid uniform to school every weekday, and my church dress on Sundays, Saturday was the only day of the week I could break free from more formal dress. The hem of the pants was a bit ragged, but Cindi had taken out Mom's old Singer cast iron sewing machine and fixed the split seam. We didn't have any rust thread, so Cindi used white, the closest color we had. I liked the way you could see the stitches on the fabric, I thought the wavy white lines cutting across the edge of my pants looked cool, just like the patterns on the quilted vests everyone else wore. I couldn't see anything wrong with how I looked. I was not wearing rags.

I looked over at the woman wearing new clothes and her daughter close to my age, wearing the latest fashion. Her culottes were what I coveted. Her crisp white blouse had been ironed with starch. I felt my face heat up. My green shirt was wrinkled and hung limply across my torso. I should have asked Daddy to set up the ironing board. Grandma had taught me to iron. I could stand on a stool and sprinkle water out of the old

seven-up bottle with the special cap on that sprinkled water onto the fabric like rain. I could have. I should have. Then I wouldn't have embarrassed my mother in public.

Ashamed, I glared back at the two females who were hiding amused expressions by covering their mouths with their hands. But their twinkling eyes gave them away. They were laughing at how I looked. My eyes started to burn with excess liquid. I would not cry. That would horrify Mom and she'd make us leave the store without my new shoes. I swallowed hard and nudged Kay. "Follow me."

And as soon as Cindi and Mom stopped to look at the brightly colored dresses for church, Kay and I dove into the circular clothes rack, finding a hiding place in the middle of the rack where critical eyes could not find us.

Rituals

The first Christmas after the accident was extremely painful. Dad and Mom wrongly assumed that Kay and I were too young to miss the material items that had always graced our celebrations. That year Cindi received a new record player. Dave had new jumping skis. Kay and I each received a new game. Mine was "Kerplunk." Kay received "Don't Break the Ice." And that was it. I was devastated. I no longer cried when I was hurt emotionally. That wasn't allowed with Mother in her new condition. After all, the common goal was to not upset Mom.

In the pictures from that Christmas, you see my maternal grandfather leaning down behind my mother's wheelchair. My brother is proudly holding his new ski boots. My sister is coyly holding her new record player in its one-piece case. And Kay and I are sitting on the couch; curlers still in our hair, looking at our one box apiece, wondering what happened to Santa. After all, Cindi and Dave no longer believed. It was grossly unfair that the faithful had been overlooked.

The realities of living with a paraplegic were staggering. Mother' spinal cord was severed at the sixth vertebra. She lost all feeling from just below her breast line. Her back looked like a zipper. There was a long scar that ran from just below her shoulder blades all the way down her back to where her pelvis began. Every inch sported parallel cuts two inches wide from the center cut moving out to the sides of her body. It looked like someone had started to fillet her like a fish, and then made the smaller cuts in order to pull the skin away. The scar never completely healed. At night we would massage A&D

ointment into the long highway of the surgeon's knife path, trying to alleviate the tightness and irritation from sitting in her wheelchair.

There were daily rituals that the children were trained to handle. The worst was the commode duty. We all tried to find another place to be whenever my mother started drinking her daily allotment of prune juice. While my mother's hospital bed had a trapeze in order to move from her chair to either her bed or the commode in her bedroom, one of us had to help with her stiff legs. It wasn't difficult. The daily routine was just so hard on Mom. Her psychological and physical discomfort with the situation of her children having to help with her toilet shaded our world.

The girls were also trained to deal with cleaning and medicating the bedsores covering the pressure points from life in a wheelchair. We would gently wash out the bedsores, or pressure sores as they are now referred to, removing the crust and infection. A salve would be applied and then cotton gauze would be carefully situated over the sore for healing to begin. This was a constant battle. One would heal and another would develop.

The other medical training was one Dave could also help with – the daily physical therapy. The nurses showed us how to exercise our mother's lifeless legs to encourage circulation that would help the blood flow freely. Clots were always the enemy, and we were dutiful in the war against this unseen foe. Mom would move to her hospital bed and using the control, lower the head to a flat position. Then the work would begin. Situating ourselves on her side, we placed one hand under her thigh and the other on her calf.

We would lift her leg as far as we could towards her head. The leg fought against

the movement. It was stiff, and the muscles would tighten against the rise towards the ceiling. Our instructions were to bring the leg up until it was perpendicular to Mom's waist. 20 repetitions were the goal. Then the other leg. Next was the hardest part. Placing our hands on her thigh, we would anchor the upper part of her leg to the bed. Then placing our other hand over the arch of her foot, we would try to bend her leg at the knee, simulating a lop-sided knee crunch. But, the knee did not want to bend and we would break a sweat in our effort to get the knee to cooperate. Eventually, we would loosen the knee into movement, like a door hinge that has rusted shut. It just took determination and patience. After the exercise, we would take out the Keri lotion and massage the limbs, working the thin lotion into the dry, cracked skin using a circular motion the nurse had shown us. The goal was to fight the atrophy in the muscles. We were at battle as my mother's lower extremity wasted away. After each physical therapy session, we were free to go. Mom took two Darvon and slept.

On days when the visiting nurse came, she was maneuvered into the bathroom and had a shower. The nurse would put a kitchen chair in the tub and lift Mom onto it, turn on the water, and carefully bathe her with a washcloth. The nurse also washed Mom's fine hair. Unfortunately, bathing only once a week left her hair oily and stringy.

In the first couple of years, the nurse would put my mother into her leg braces. These were evil. Steel and leather tethers encased Mom's legs. The knee bolts were tightened in order to keep her knees straight. It took two people to lift my mother and her legs into an upright position. The problem was that her hips had forgotten how to swivel. With a lot of coaxing, she would be upright. With a person on each side, Mom would be

coaxed to the kitchen sink. Dad installed eye bolts on the frame of the cabinets below the sink. A special belt was ordered, and by hooking each side, Mom was anchored in an upright position. It was the only way she could fit into the galley kitchen. There, using the sink hose, her hair would be washed. The doctors wanted Mom to stand every day. It was good for her.

Mom protested, she claimed it hurt too much. After a couple of years, everyone gave up the battle and the braces were relegated to the front hall closet. My father found a new hair product: Pssst. It was an aerosol that one sprayed onto the hair. The contents absorbed the excess hair oil and in theory you simply brushed out the product. In reality, mother always looked like she had stood in a snowstorm without a hat.

The other visible repercussion of the accident involved her smile. Her teeth blackened and rotted from her medications. No longer did my mother smile for anyone. Her teeth embarrassed her.

Headwaters

One year after the accident, Daddy decided it was time for a camping trip to Itasca State Park in Bemidji, Minnesota. Obviously, our old one-room canvas tent would no longer hold the family. Sears featured a new tent that year, and it was perfect. There was one main room and three wings. Dad and Dave brought the tent home and put it up in the backyard. It had to be waterproofed before we left for vacation. Kay and I watched from the kitchen table as the tent went up. We were to "stay out of the way" as the males tried to figure out how the poles and canvas went together to create our vacation home. As soon as the metal spikes had secured the tent to the earth, I grabbed Kay's hand and we exited out the kitchen door on the side of the house. The screen door slammed shut, announcing our intent.

Smiling, Dad turned to us as we ran the twenty feet to him. "Can we go in now, Daddy?" I asked. This was a big moment. Aside from mother's hospital equipment, we rarely had new stuff to try out. "Okay girls, let's go in, and then I have a job for you." Dad bent over to grab the heavy gold zipper on the canvas "door" that faced the house. He looked back at the kitchen window. He smiled and waved. Cindi had helped Mom out of bed and negotiated her wheelchair so that she had a clear view of the events unfolding in the backyard. In the window we could see Mom's head barely clearing the window sill. Cindi's head floated six inches higher than Mom's.

The zipper stuck. Dad shouted over to David, who was working with the garden hose, carefully uncoiling it across the backyard from the spigot underneath the kitchen

window. “Dave, go in the house and grab my pencil.”

Dave quickly emerged with the pencil only my dad used. It was for his carpenter work. It was the same yellow color as my school pencils but a different shape. Instead of a long circular tube with a thick lead, it was awkward in size. Almost rectangular in shape. The lead was heavy, 10 times as thick as the pencils I used. Dad took out his pocket knife and sharpened the lead to a triangular point. The shavings wafted down, thin curly cues littered the entrance to the tent. Carefully Dad ran the lead down the center of the shiny gold metal that stubbornly refused to allow the zipper to go upwards. “There. Let's try it again.”

This time the zipper glided up, and Dad moved upwards to a standing position as the canvas parted. Taut green screening allowed Kay and I a glimpse into the shadowy interior. I inhaled deeply. New. It smelled new. I shuddered in excitement. “Daddy, can we go in now?” I pleaded. I wanted to see where I would be spending my nights when we finally left for a vacation.

“Just a minute. I have to get the screen door open.” Dad tied back the heavy canvas door with the ribbons of canvas sewn just above my head. The pencil reemerged from the pocket of his blue cotton work shirt. Once again he drew a line across the closed zipper teeth of the screen door. As soon as the zipper was an inch above my head, I grabbed Kay's hand and we darted inside. It was cool in the central room. I looked up. The ceiling towered above me. Wow. I could stand in the center room. I moved to beside the door and put my arms straight out. “Kay, watch this.” As my dad stood in the doorway, I pirouetted twice across the open space until my fingers touched canvas again.

"What's this?" I poked a loose piece of green fabric.

"That's a sleeping room, Shari." Dad came in through the screen door and zipped it shut to keep out the bugs.

"See? Lift up the flap and go in." I parted the two pieces of canvas and entered another room. I pirouetted again. One and half times to a wall with another flap. I lifted and sunshine flowed in, giving me a better view.

"This is the window. You roll up the shade like this." Dad took the two bottom edges and rolled it upwards into a tube exposing a rectangular window covered in mesh. "And then you tie it like this." I looked for Kay, but she wasn't by Dad.

"Kay, come and see!" Kay peered around my dad. "Is this our room?" She looked up at my dad.

"This is the smaller room. Come out and I'll show you where you girls will sleep." Dad reached over and untied the canvas. It was like dusk inside the tent again, the only light filtering from the screen door. There were three sleeping rooms. The smaller one in the back of the tent, and two off to the sides. All were sectioned off with heavy canvas curtains. One of the larger rooms was for the three girls, one for Mom and Dad. The smaller back room was for Dave.

Dave looked in. "Are we ready now, Dad?"

"Just a minute. Girls, your job is to watch for leaks. I'm going to turn on the hose and you look up and make sure there isn't any water coming in. If you see drips, call, but don't touch any of the walls. If you touch the walls, it will leak. Got it?"

I looked at Kay, smiling. This we could do.

Dave ran back to the house to turn on the hose. Kay and I stood in the center of the tent and listened while my Dad checked the tent for leaks by spraying it down with water. Afraid to wreck the tent, we stood with our heads flung back, watching for any water that might proclaim the tent defective. The hose released the drops on the roof and sides of the tent. Soon the sound of water inside the dusky interior created a humid cocoon inspiring Kay and I to lie down. We settled in the huge center room, holding hands, turning our heads for any drips. Afraid that we might touch the canvas and ruin the new tent, we remained still. Daddy could check the sleeping rooms. No water leaked through. We were ready for a vacation.

Dad packed the trunk with all of the required gear for existence away from home. Mom's equipment filled the trunk of the Ford. We were instructed to pack just what we needed. By the time Dad placed the Green Coleman cooler with our food in the trunk, the back of the car sagged in anticipation of escape from home.

The drive to Bemidji was five hours. We could not leave until after Dad got off work, so we did not arrive at our destination until after 10 o'clock at night. About half way up to the campground, my dad smelled something burning. We stopped the car at a gas station, but neither dad nor the mechanic could find anything wrong with the car. We continued our northward journey.

It was dark when we finally arrived at the campground. We just pulled into our space when the heavens opened up, and a violent thunderstorm created a noisy announcement of our arrival. My dad and Dave ran to the trunk and started to unload the gear. Kay and I ran to the bathroom. Cindi stayed in the car with Mom. When Kay and I

returned, Dad was swearing a blue streak.

"God-damn it!"

My mother twisted toward the window in the front seat. The rain was coming down so hard, that she could not see what was happening outside. Dad opened the door to the car, rain dripping off his bald head into the car.

"Audrey, we have a problem. There was a hole in the muffler. It burnt the tent. I have to go up to the lodge."

The burning smell had been the canvas tent smoldering in the trunk of the car. Folded neatly, the heat from the muffler had gone through all six layers of the carefully folded tent, leaving roundish gaps in the canvas, eight inches in diameter.

While we huddled in the car, Dad secured a canvas drop cloth and heavy needle and thread from the campground lodge. He sat at the abandoned picnic table under a large pine tree and sewed the heavy canvas with uneven stitches over the large holes. Finally, at midnight our tent was raised, and we collapsed into the deep slumber the north woods inspire. My mother and father were the only two who had cots. All of the kids slept on air mattresses on the floor.

At 8:00 Cindi woke up. The hole next to her had sprung a leak during the night, and her sleeping bag, a new summer weight green and white checked interior, was damp. She crawled out of the bag and stood in the center of the tent. I looked over and started to laugh.

"Shari, quiet. Your mother is still sleeping," Dad hissed across the tent.

I could not stop giggling. Kay rolled over and hit me. I leaned over and whispered

in her ear. “Look at Cindi.”

Kay opened her eyes and looked up at our older sister. She gasped. “Cindi, why are you green?”

Cindi looked down. Her sleeping bag, damp with rain water, had left the green dye from the checkered print all over her exposed skin. Her pajamas also had a sickly hue. She screamed.

“Quiet.” My dad shifted off his cot and put on a pair of pants. Shirtless, he opened the flaps to the girls wing of the tent. “Oh, Jesus Christ.”

Cindi's legs, arms, and face matched the pine trees that sheltered our weekend abode. Kay and I could not stop giggling and woke our mother.

“Don, Don, what's going on?”

Dad looked at Cindi. “Go show your mother and see what she thinks.” Cindi wiped her tears on her pajama top and crossed the center of the tent. Dave rolled over and stuck his head through the flaps. “Hey, Gazoo!”

“That's not funny David.”

Cindi did not want to represent the character from the Flintstones cartoon. Kay and I laughed harder. Dave was right. If you ignored her brown hair, Cindi did look like Gazoo, the animated Martian from one of the few television shows we were allowed to watch. Cindi started to sob and quickly went behind the flaps to the wing that hid our mother from the rest of the family. We could here murmurs of consoling words and Cindi's occasional sobs.

Soon Cindi emerged wrapped in my mother's beach towel. “Don, get out the

shower supplies for Cindi. Kay and Shari, go with your sister up to the shower house." Kay and I put on our robes, slid tennis shoes over bare feet, and went out into the clear morning air. Someone was cooking bacon over an open flame. The wood smoke permeated the air. Oh man, I was hungry.

Dad stuck his head out the tent. "Wait A minute girls. I'm going to empty your mother's catheter and you can empty the jar when you go up to the bathroom." Anxiously I scanned the campground. Whew. I didn't see anyone else taking the trip to the shower. I waited as my father emptied the full catheter bag into a large glass mason jar. It filled the jar an inch below the rim. I took the jar carefully. The contents were still warm and the smell of urine wafted up to my nose. I put my right hand on the bottom to keep it steady and held the jar steady with my left hand, arms extended so that if by chance I did slop some of the contents, it wouldn't be on me. I had learned from previous experience to take this chore seriously.

I looked back at Dad as we trudged with Cindi up to the bathhouse. I carried the jar full of my mother's urine. Kay carried the White Rain shampoo bottle and Dial soap. We all wore slightly damp towels around our necks, thick necklaces roped off the ground. A mist hung on the ground from the night before, rising just up over our ankles. As we followed the dirt road up to the log shower house, we took in our surroundings we missed the night before due to the rain. The trees towered above our heads. Giant pines reached for the pale blue sky. Wisps of clouds promised no more threats of leaking tents. We could hear movements inside the neighboring tents.

Few people were up and about this early in the morning. Hopefully, we wouldn't

have to wait for a shower. If we were really lucky, the hot water would still be hot. We went in a slow processional, so that I didn't spill the jar's contents. I went quickly into a stall and dumped the urine in the toilet. I flushed, relieved to see the yellow contents whisked away. I filled the jar with hot water from the tap and emptied the clear contents into the toilet again. Then I turned on the hot water and washed my hands with Dial soap. I used my soapy hands to wash the sink. I didn't want to leave any remains for the next person who came into the bathroom. I was thankful no one came in to see my ritual.

Cindi emerged from the shower a paler shade of green. Really, unless you knew that her skin was a light olive color normally, you could hardly mistake her for a Martian. Cindi still glowered from the ordeal. Kay and I skipped back to the campsite in our clean clothes, jean shorts, and sleeveless blouses for a day of adventure. Dad had a bonfire going outside the tent. As the sun rose, I could see the patches on the tent. Mom was up, sitting near the fire in her wheelchair. Dad had the Coleman stove going too, bacon sizzling, eggs whipped in the bowl, ready to be scrambled after the bacon was done. Coffee perked in the old tin peculator on a back burner. The smell of breakfast combined with the cool, crisp air made my stomach growl. I took off my sneakers. The white keds were no longer white. The rain from the night before had mixed with the orange, iron colored gravel and stained the shoes. The laces cemented together, and I slid them off, my clean feet no longer comfortable with the damp.

"Here, give me your shoes." Dad lined the fire ring with our soaked sneakers, bottom side up to dry. I flexed my toes on the grass intermixed with dry pine needles. Luckily, I was a bare-foot child, and the thick calluses from running around without

shoes protected my soles from the prickling needles. I ducked into the tent to put away the empty jar.

The rest of the campground started to rise and the neighbors came out to see our family eating breakfast at the picnic table, covered with a white and red checked tablecloth. The Coleman stove graced one end of the table, my mother and her wheelchair graced the other end. We planned the day's adventures.

Kay and I went exploring. As our shoes were still drying by the fire, Kay wore my mother's shoes. Since the shoes were only on my mother's feet and never walked in, they were still stiff, like new shoes out of the box. The brown loafers fit Kay perfectly. I walked alongside the hiking paths barefoot. We explored the morning away, daring to step in the stream that claimed to be the start of the mighty Mississippi. We waded, afraid to go too deep. We had been told to stay out of the water by our parents.

On the way back to the campsite where our parents waited, Kay and I stopped for a drink. The water fountain along the path was built of stone with stairs that allowed us to reach the flowing water. As Kay climbed up for her drink, I noticed a long black mark on her ankle.

I peered closer and screamed. “Kay, it's a leech!”

There, on Kay's ankle a black ribbon two inches long had begun its feast on my sister's skin.

“Get it off!”

“I am not touching that! Let's go back and get Dave or Dad.” But Kay did not want to wait. She was jumping around, shaking her foot, desperate to dislodge the

parasite from her skin.

"Okay, okay. Give me a shoe."

With my mother's shoe, I beat at my sister's ankle, hitting the leach until it finally released its grip and rolled onto the dry path in a black ball. I put on the shoe and stomped on the leech until I was sure it would never snack on a human being again. Slowly we made our way back to camp, Kay's ankle turning a darker blue with each step.

"Shari, I can't walk. It hurts!"

I looked down. Kay's ankle was getting poofy.

"Here, I'll give you a piggy-back ride."

Kay climbed on my back and I staggered. Although I was taller by at least six inches, Kay was solid. Kay wiggled, trying to find a secure position.

"Kay, stick out your legs and hold onto my shoulders. Let go of my neck, I can't breath! Jeez. You are a chunk."

"Shari, I am not! You're going to be in so much trouble! Look at my foot."

"I'm going to tell Mom that you went in the river by yourself. She'll believe me. It wasn't my idea."

"Don't call me a chunk then. I'll tell Mom and Dad it was a wood tick."

"Deal. Just quit wiggling and don't lean back. I don't want to fall."

Somehow I managed to carry Kay back to the campsite. It was lunchtime by the time we arrived. Cindi was already roasting her hot dog when I deposited Kay on the picnic table bench. Kay started to cry. "Let me see Kay." Cindi leaned her long silver roasting fork against the rock fire ring. "What happened?"

Kay gulped. “I had a leech on me. Shari had to beat it off with Mom's shoe.”

My Dad opened the tent's zipper.

“And just how did you manage to get a leech on you, Kay. Didn't I tell you girls to stay away from the water?”

Kay looked over at me next to the fire. I leaned down and moved Cindi's hot dog to a new position. If I looked at my dad, he would be able to see my eyes starting to fill with tears. I peered through my eyelashes to sneak a peek at Kay. What happened to the wood tick story? We always found wood ticks on us when came back from hiking. Wood tick checks were a nightly event. If you found one, Dad let us light one of the long wooden matches with a white top. You blew out the flame and touched the top of the tick. When it crawled out of your skin, you took a tissue, wrapped up the tick and threw it in the fire. Then, if you were lucky, you watched the tick's body expand until it exploded.

“But Daddy! We didn't go in! We just stood next to the water. The leech must have crawled on me in the grass!”

“Okay. You girls are done exploring on your own now. David!”

Dave looked up from the other side of the picnic table. “What?”

“Get a towel and put some ice from the cooler on your sister's ankle.”

I watched as Dave put down the piece of wood he had been whittling on the table. He thrust his pen knife with the largest blade exposed into the seat. “Does this mean Cindi and I have to baby-sit now?” From his tone, I could tell that my brother did not especially relish the idea of being responsible for two little girls.

Dad sighed. “You watch Shari, and Cindi can watch Kay.”

Smokescreen

The faithful. God never gives you more than you can handle. You will always have enough. Miracles occur for the faithful. Yes. Pray, pray, pray. Mother and Father instilled the daily faith that presided in our daily lives.

After the accident we continued to attend church every Sunday. This was the only day Dad did not have to work. A pattern evolved.

One of the weekly medical procedures my father handled was the cleaning of mother's catheter. Behind the closed door of my parent's bedroom my father would complete the task every Sunday morning. The rest of the family would take turns in the bathroom, preparing for church. My father would get my Mom ready. Then he would disinfect the catheter cleaning stuff on the stove. The apparatus disinfected in the boiling water as my father showered and shaved. After the timer went off signaling the completion of the process, Dad would turn off the stove. We would all depart for mass.

One spring Sunday four years after the accident, we were all adjusted to our routine. The day was normal, all of us played our roles. This day, my paternal grandparents were to meet us at our house after church for a family dinner. As my father turned on to our street, mother gasped. Our front yard contained a fire truck. As my father pulled into the driveway behind my grandparents' vehicle, my grandmother emerged out the side door.

"Good thing we arrived early, Don. The house was filled with smoke so I went to the neighbor's to call the fire department."

We all just stared at Grandma Rose. My grandfather, Pete, came out with a fireman. "It seems something was left on the stove. Luckily there is just smoke damage."

My mother looked over at my dad. "Don, get me out of the car."

The fireman led the family on a tour. All of the walls were colored with black cobwebs. The entire house had been filled with smoke by the time by grandparents had arrived. The insurance company was called and an adjuster came out to assess the damage. They determined that my father had not fully depressed the burner button on the stove. The water had continued to boil while we were in church. The melted plastic from the catheter had caught fire and the aroma of melted plastic permeated all the walls, carpet, and clothing in our ranch home. The fireman said we were lucky. The house wasn't a total loss.

The insurance company covered the damage. All of our clothes had to be professionally dry cleaned. Professional painters were commissioned to repaint the entire first floor of our house. To expedite the process, white was used in every room. Poor Peppi, for a week he was locked in the basement while the painters worked their way from room to room. Kay and I were home with Mom, and watched as the ugly black stains were transformed into a pristine canvas. Every room looked alike. The living room was the greatest challenge. As the largest, open room in the house, the smoke had left a trail the painters found difficult to cover. Mom was taking a nap while the painters worked. One of the young painters decided it was time for lunch. As the eldest person still conscious, he consulted with me.

"So, where is the closest place to get a good hamburger around here?" I was

thirteen and just starting to notice that there were two genders. I looked at the paint speckled clothes of a younger man. I categorized him closer to my brother's age, 19. His partner seemed older. The older guy would talk about his kids while he painted.

"Well, there's always McDonald's, or you could go to the Dairy Queen." In my suburb, there weren't too many choices.

The young painter's eyes turned to me in amusement, "So, is this Dairy Queen one of the brassieres?"

I felt my face go hot. I had just started wearing a regular bra. They were still at the cleaner's, and it had been decided that I could get along without for a few days. With my slight build, my bras were not a critical piece of clothing.

The older man jerked around, his brush dripping on the canvas drop cloth that covered the couch. "Don't you mean brazier, you idiot?"

Only the older man came back from lunch. The painting was almost done and only one painter was needed to finish the work. The house looked great. The damage did not bleed through.

Unraveling

In order to function, all of us had daily responsibilities. By the time I was thirteen, I was in given full charge of the family laundry. As my father worked outside, his work clothes had to be laundered daily. That was my job.

Five years after the accident, Mom was in the hospital again for pneumonia. That evening I had put my father's work clothes into the dryer and gone upstairs to bed. My father would come home and take them out for the next day. But something went wrong with the dryer. I was sound asleep when my father entered my bedroom like a bull. "Shari, I told you I had to have clean clothes for tomorrow. They are soaking wet. You didn't turn on the dryer." Dad ripped me from my mattress by the shoulders. "Why, why would you do this? You know better." With each word my father shook my body. I was sleeping underneath the open window. With each word my head flew back and smashed against the window sill. My eyes rolled and no words could escape my throat.

I heard Dave before I saw him. Dave flew into the room and grabbed my father by the waist. Dad outweighed Dave by at least fifty pounds. Somehow Dave managed to distance us from the window. Screaming at my Dad that he was killing me, Dave pried my father's hands from my shoulders and saved my life.

The rage faded from my father. He looked down at my quaking body on the mattress. Dad was never physical with the kids. Long ago spankings had ceased. He reached out to touch my head. Dave looked at my father with disgust. "I'll take care of it. You get out." As I finally found my voice, I sobbed while my older brother took me into

his arms and checked for blood. I had a huge lump on the back of my skull. Dave got an ice pack and held it to my scalp until I stopped crying. Then he stayed with me and talked, not wanting me to fall asleep right away. That night things shifted. Dave and my dad had declared war. My brother moved out of our home at 17. I learned to always follow through with my commitments after the dryer experience. I just wanted to keep everyone happy. But how I missed my big brother. Mom returned home, but her rally was short-lived.

Mom crocheted delicate doilies or made beautiful purses from yarn to supplement the family income. Her needle work was beautiful. She sat in her wheelchair with the custom-made table that rested on the arms of her chair. As she watched the color television set Dave had bought her, her fingers would fly. Only on occasion would she look to a pattern for guidance. Every month Dad would pick up the woman's magazines at the grocery checkout for Mom. Every month we would comb through the featured patterns to see if there was a new project we could have Mom complete. We may not have had many store-bought clothes, but our mittens, scarves, and sweaters were first-rate thanks to Mom's talent.

The family shopped at Target for yarn. I begged Mom to crochet a version of the latest clothing trend in 1971: a loosely constructed yarn poncho. She had already made me a maroon vest with the open weave. The poncho was a similar stitch, and the latest must-have thanks to the hippies who favored natural fabrics.

Mom agreed to make me the poncho. I parked her wheelchair in front of the huge display, ready to make my choice.

"But Mom, I like the lime green yarn!"

"No, Shari, what would you wear the poncho with? You don't have anything to match. Let's get the navy yarn. Then you can wear the poncho to church and school too.

"Lime green is in, Mom.

And so it was. The green shimmered in its casing. It was an acid lime green, and I knew it would match the jeans I had just altered. I had commandeered my mother's old Singer sewing machine and ripped out the outside seams of my jeans from the knees down. I had then walked the three miles to Reeds to purchase a wild, cotton paisley print. The fabric addition had assured my tight, faded jeans flowed out over my fake earth shoes. They looked great. A lime green poncho would cinch the outfit – I could almost pass for a Dayton's shopper. The current style was expensive, worn clothes.

My Mother sighed.

"How about I make the poncho out of the navy, and I'll knit you a short sleeve sweater with the green?"

"Okay, Mom."

"Put two skeins of the blue in the cart, two of the green, and you'll need a contrasting color for the green. The pattern calls for two horizontal stripes across the chest."

I looked at the rainbow of yarn in the bins. What color? Mom pointed to a bright teal blue. Perfect. I put one skein of teal into the cart.

Mom finished the needle work I requested. She was right. I wore the poncho regularly. The green short sleeve sweater I wore twice before packing it away.

The final project my mother worked on was a crocheted afghan. The pattern called for individual blocks. My mother chose the colors of the rainbow. A few of the colors were newly purchased. Most were not. Mother went through the large yarn bag, color-coordinating her palate from previous projects. Each square began with the darkest hue of the color as the center piece. A four-petaled shamrock minus the stem. Then the color darkens just a bit. Four darker leaves that branch out from the center. The middle is surrounded by an even lighter hue of the palate. The final color is the pastel shade of the original center. There are maroons, purples, pinks, yellows, greens, rust, brown, and lavender squares. Each square is framed in black yarn. The artistry was contemporary, yet each piece an heirloom from previous creations. The plan was to sew all the individual squares together with thread into one large work of art.

Summer was fading fast. My friend Marie and I were walking to Snyder's drug store one afternoon. We would go to the back counter to the soda counter. This was new in 1971. The store had added a retro-counter with a long, high gray-topped counter. The stools were red vinyl with gray edging. The stools swiveled on a tall chrome tube. It was the place to be seen in Junior High. A cherry coke was just 50 cents. Marie and I had taken to walking the mile to the store three times a week.

We walked the two miles to Snyder's just before Marie and I were both to start eighth grade. Marie still attended parochial school, and would be going to the Catholic high school in the next suburb. I had transferred to public schools in sixth grade. The public school boys were after us to celebrate the end of summer. Labor Day was the official end of vacation. Classes started the Tuesday following the holiday. We walked

and talked as we sashayed down the middle of the empty street.

I was sporting another pair of newly altered jeans with a tie-dyed shirt I had made the night before, strutting my stuff as only fourteen year old girls can. I had sprouted that summer. I no longer could compete in gymnastics. My height topped off at 5"7." While my long legs and blond hair garnered me some male attention, I could not compete with Marie. Friends consoled my on my long, lean look. Twiggy was popular, and I shared the same physic. I wasn't impressed or consoled by the comparison. I was jealous of my friend. Marie had "borrowed" her older sister's new Indian gauze shirt. It showed off the assets she had acquired over the summer. We discussed boys and school. A lull in the conversation ensued as we traveled in the mid-afternoon sun.

I don't know why I said it. It just popped out.

"My Mom won't make it until Christmas."

"Is she sick again?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then what are you talking about?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I hadn't thought about my Mom dying for a long time. Sure, she got sick, but she always rallied. Aunt Wilma always found a positive in Mom's health. The last time Mom had a stomach ache, Wilma was so excited. Mom had felt something below her waist. Celebrate!

"It's just a feeling I have. I don't think my Mom will live until Christmas."

"Oh."

Marie couldn't think of anything to say. So, she changed the subject. We decided

to have the party. The topic change was good. I didn't have to think about Mom.

We schemed. On a Friday, we were going to have a Jim, John, and Larry over to Marie's house. We had been hanging out with the boys at the beach over the summer. They were exciting – they smoked stolen cigarettes and could drink whiskey without getting sick. Jim's claim to fame was blowing up the plumbing in the Junior High the year before by throwing an M-80 down the toilet. Marie and I were flattered by the attention.

Marie's dad purchased beer in cases, we could have quite a party while her Mom and Dad both worked. It would be a nice end to the summer. The party started at noon. Marie opened the beers. She got out the salt shaker.

"What's that for?" I couldn't figure out what she was going to salt. This was a drinking only party. No food.

"My dad always puts salt in his beer."

"Oh." I shook just a little in. My German father had given me a sip of beer before. This was the first time I had ever consumed an entire bottle by myself.

The boys encouraged the two of us to drink down the first bottle fast. That way we wouldn't get sick. They sat drinking their own beers while supervising Marie and me.

The party did not last long. Marie's father decided to come home for lunch. We heard the car in the driveway. Jim grabbed me by the arm and ran out the front door, dragging me with him as we stumbled through the neighbor's hedges and out of parental range.

"I feel sick." I really did not feel well. My eyes were refusing to focus and my

legs wobbled as I tried to keep up.

"Don't throw up." Jim let go of my arm. "John, are your parents home?"

"Nah. But my sister's in the house. We can hang out in the garage attic until she feels good enough to go home."

I slept until 2:30 in a sleeping bag in John's garage attic. Jim, John, and Larry smoked cigarettes and played poker. When I woke up, Larry told me I had to go home.

I walked home alone. Luckily Mom was asleep and Norma had already gone for the day. Kay was watching T.V., Batman came on at 3:00 and nothing could have blasted her off the couch. I slipped into the bathroom to wash off the evidence- I reeked of beer and stolen cigarettes.

Marie's Mom called asking to speak to Mother that night. I answered the phone. "No, she's sleeping. Can I take a message?" I asked, trembling.

"No, I'll try to call tomorrow." Marie's mom couldn't tell if it was me or my sisters. She didn't mention the boys or the beer. I had lucked out.

But there was no tomorrow to call. That night my Mom started running a fever. When I awoke, I saw the Supreme Unction candle sitting out in the living room. I walked back to Mom's bedroom. It was empty.

By the time I retraced my steps to the living room, Cindi was sitting on the couch. She looked up from the paper she had started to read and answered my unasked question. "Mom asked Dad to call the priest before he took her to the hospital."

"What's wrong?" I looked at the candle. The last of the Seven Sacraments. I had already gone through the first four: baptism, Holy Communion, Reconciliation, and

Confirmation. Wow. Mom had asked for the final sacrament. This must be serious. I picked up the bottle of Holy oil that was no longer full. The candle still gave off a bit of a burnt odor. I repacked the wooden cross, putting everything back into place. Then I slid the two parts of the cross back together. I hung it back on the living room wall. The priest and my parents were experts on not waking up the rest of the family. Yet, I wondered if my beer consumption had something to do with my missing the middle of the night drama.

"Pneumonia, that's what Dad thinks." Cindi stood up. "Go eat. Dave's coming over to take us to the hospital in a little while, but I'm not sure we'll be able to see her. We can talk to Dad when we get there."

I went into the kitchen and poured myself a bowl of Puffed Rice. I sat down and consumed the cereal with skim milk. I needed a shower before we left. I was lucky. The bathroom was still open. I dried my long hair under the hood hair dryer while I waited for Dave to transport us to the familiar St. Paul Ramsey Intensive Care waiting room.

Crammed in the small waiting room with my Aunt Wilma, we all waited to see Mother as she battled through yet another bout of pneumonia. Dad was in the room with Mom. All four kids waited for our turn to go in to see her, one at a time. Intensive Care had strict guidelines. Now that I was fourteen, I was finally of legal visiting age in the unit. As I flipped through ancient "Life" magazines, I remembered the time my mom's roommate had been a woman with second degree burns over 60% of her body. I shuddered as I remembered the red, raw, naked flesh. There was solace in the fact that this time my Mom had a private room. I breathed through my mouth. The scent of

Intensive Care still tripped my gag reflex, making bile creep up my esophagus. I found if I avoided breathing in the toxic fragrance, I could sit for long periods of time. I gazed at the glossy pictures, not seeing a thing and psyched myself for the short walk down the hall. Dave and Cindi started their music debate again. They had advanced from the Beatles/Beach Boys debate to The Carpenter's/Buffalo Springfield war. I usually sided with Dave – I liked both the Beach Boys and Buffalo Springfield. But right now Karen Carpenter's haunting voice echoed my heart. Saying good-bye to love sounded more like my life. I hated the hospital.

My mother was dwarfed by the whiteness of the room. She lay on her back to accommodate all of the tubes. One went down her throat. Others erupted from the veins in her arms. The machines creating a barricade around the bed bleeped and blipped. I averted my eyes from my mother's face. A nurse walked into the room. With her untethered hand she signaled for a piece of paper. She wrote a short note. I read it upside down.

"Water?"

The nurse shook her head. "No, I'm sorry, you can't have any water while the intubation tube is in. I promise. I'll be waiting with a glass as soon as the tube comes out."

I looked at my mother. The tube took up a lot of space. It was always weird to see her with the tubes. Mom chewed half a stick of Wrigley's spearmint gum at all times. To see her jaw unmoving bothered me. Tears threatened and I swallowed.

I moved between the machines until I could hold the one arm not involved in

medication. I held her hand.

"Hi Mom. I miss you." In my head the beer party played over. How could I ever tell my mother I was caught drinking with boys in the middle of the day? I blushed. My Dad misinterpreted my discomfort.

'Why don't you say good-bye, Shari? Then you can send Kay in."

"I love you Mom. Come home soon." I squeezed Mom's hand and she inclined her head as far as the tube allowed. I smiled and walked down the hallway to the waiting room.

Kay was in tears. Aunt Wilma was giving her a hug, telling her it was okay. "Your Mother will understand. You'll see her in a few days when she comes home."

Kay sat back down and Aunt Wilma went down the hall to let my parents know Kay didn't feel well. She would see Mom another time.

The family reverted to our hospital schedule for the next few days. Dad worked and went to the hospital. The only time we saw him was when he came home for a quick shower. Cindi went to her classes at White Bear High and worked in the evenings. Kay and I went to school at Sunrise Park Junior High. Dave worked and went home to his apartment. Only Peppi seemed to be lost. He kept vigil next to Mom's empty hospital bed, waiting for her to come home.

Mom improved with medication and the tubes were removed. I can only hope the nurse was waiting with her glass of water. Three days later Dad told us that Mom would be coming home the next day. The doctors wanted to hold her one more night for

observation. Kay breathed a sigh of relief.

We prepared for the homecoming. The house was cleaned. I did the laundry, making sure to wash the bed linens for Mom's hospital bed. I took the time to actually complete the hospital corners on the sheets. Usually, I just threw the sheets and faked the corners. They never held as they should. This time I was careful. I made a grocery list and planned to make Chili for Mom's return dinner. At fourteen, this was my specialty. It was a version of my Mother's recipe. The night before she was to return home, we all made one final check. We were ready.

I went to bed by 10:00 as usual. I had moved downstairs to Dave's old bedroom in the basement. I put my Carol King album on Cindi's old turn table and drifted off while Carol sang about people being so far away. The slow rhythm lulled me. I collapsed and slept deeply.

Something woke me from my sleep in the early morning hours. It wasn't a nightmare, and the record twirled soundlessly on the turntable. I sat straight up in my twin bed waiting. For some reason, I was wide awake. After a minute, the phone started to ring upstairs. I heard my father's heavy feet hit the floor. I traced his movement as he made his way from his single bed next to the empty hospital bed. He strode down the hallway to catch the ringing phone. I heard him pick up the only extension in the house. In the kitchen a floor above me, I heard a frantic whispered conversation. I listened as my father moved back to his bedroom to dress. Then the side door opened and shut. The car started without hesitation. I listened as the car backed out of the driveway. Then I knew. Mother had died in her sleep. They needed Dad at the hospital.

Epilogue

In the years after my mother died, I would awake from a recurring nightmare. Alone, I enter a sterile world. The walls shine, the floors shine, and the faces of the nurses glow under the fluorescent lights. It does not smell like the hospital; instead, the unmistakable combination of lilac and Jergens lotion permeates my olfactory senses. I walk to the last room on the left of the long hallway, and look in. I stare, afraid to enter. There is my mother in her hospital bed with all of her paraplegic paraphernalia organized just as it was in my childhood home. The bed against the long wall of the room, the commode positioned under the transfer bar held by chains just six inches above her bed, the shelf with books and brightly colored yarn and craft needles waiting to help her pass the time. Her small wheelchair, the worn maroon vinyl cracked from long use is folded, waiting at the end of the bed.

Slowly she turns her face to me, I remain in the doorway, afraid to enter, knowing that I cannot touch her.

"Mom. You're still alive?" I can barely choke out the words. "Why? Why did you leave me? Daddy told me you were dead. I need you."

My mother looks up and her clear blue eyes pierce through me.

"I left so you could live."

I awake, crying alone in my bed.

When I started to compose this manuscript, I knew that in order to move on with my life I needed to explore the trauma of my childhood. The incidents depicted in the text are real – the details, however, may or may not be exact. Obviously, one of the human mind's greatest accomplishments is to protect the individual from too much pain. Also, as this takes place from the ages of five – fourteen, I cannot claim to recall every detail in precise accuracy. Yet, this manuscript is what I remember. My family did survive together, and actually we went on to live productive lives. We all survived together. Just keep in mind that I was a child during the events portrayed here – and my memories are those of a young mind. I'm sure I have not recalled the incidents in the same manner as other members of my family. Also, as I was a teenager towards the end of this time-period, I am quite certain that the drama may be overstated. Take for instance the dryer incident. I seem to recall the scene as depicted. I am certain that my father did not harm me. In fact, Donald Van Dusartz is my greatest hero. He showed me how to live with dignity and grace.